

# THE HAZLITT REVIEW

*The Hazlitt Review* is an annual peer-reviewed journal, the first internationally to be devoted to Hazlitt studies. The *Review* aims to promote and maintain Hazlitt's standing, both in the academy and to a wider readership, by providing a forum for new writing on Hazlitt, by established scholars as well as more recent entrants in the field.

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# THE HAZLITT REVIEW

VOLUME 11, 2018  
Hazlitt and Life-Writing

Hazlitt on Wordsworth 5  
JONATHAN BATE

Sitting on Hazlitt's Knee 23  
JON COOK

Hazlitt on Identity: The Inveterate Self and Social Change 37  
JOHN WHALE

Hazlitt's Journey to Italy 49  
CRISTINA CONSIGLIO

## Book Reviews

Cristina Consiglio, *William Hazlitt lettore di Shakespeare*; Cristina Consiglio (ed. and transl.), *William Hazlitt. Ritratti romani*; Alfonso Geraci and Francesco Romero (ed. and transl.), *William Hazlitt. I personaggi del teatro di Shakespeare*  
reviewed by Elisa Fortunato 61

Michael D. Hurley and Marcus Waithe (eds.), *Thinking Through Style: Non-Fiction Prose of the Long Nineteenth Century*  
reviewed by Gregory Dart 65



## HAZLITT ON WORDSWORTH

Hazlitt Society Annual Lecture, 2017

*Jonathan Bate*

It is a pleasure and an honour to be delivering this year's annual Hazlitt Lecture, doubly so since it is my first opportunity to address the Hazlitt Society since you so generously elected me to be your President. The latter honour is truly humbling, given that your first President was the immortal Michael Foot. One of my most treasured possessions is a book discovered by a former student in the inventory of the dealer who had the privilege of dispersing the great man's library. It is his heavily annotated copy, the basis of one of the most perceptive and generous reviews I have been lucky enough to receive, of my 1989 book *Shakespearean Constitutions: Politics, Theatre, Criticism 1730-1830*, a large proportion of which was devoted to Hazlitt as a reader of Shakespeare in the theatre and on the page, in the essay form and in the lecture room, and by way of those copious incidental quotations that are such a distinctive feature of his style. On the first page, Foot has written in his fluent pencil hand, 'Reviewed April 1990 – A great Hazlittian achievement'. It is a greater achievement still to have been considered worthy to follow in Michael's Hazlittian footsteps, even though one suspects that, were he alive today, he might feel that the very word President now carries a certain taint. Hazlitt's essay on Trump is one that I am sure we all wish we could read.

In the circumstances, it will perhaps be fitting to say something of 'My First Acquaintance with Hazlitt'. I described it in the voice of a thinly veiled *persona* in my novel *The Cure for Love*, which was not so much a novel as a meditation on Hazlitt in general and the *Liber Amoris* in particular:

I think that I would have been about fifteen years old. Among my set books at school was an anthology of essays which my teacher had put together himself. Somehow the texts were more immediate for being typewritten, cyclostyled and stapled, not printed and bound. I liked the clarity of an essay about shooting an elephant, but best of all I liked the one about the prize fight. And this moment, the moment when Mr Thomas Hickman, known in the ring as the Gas-man, stood like something preternatural and you didn't know which way he was going to fall, was the most memorable of all. It was one of the first times I had seen what good writing could do, how it could make a moment

– an action, a feeling – that is long past, or that never happened, seem like something we have witnessed, something we have felt.

As soon as I had swallowed the essay into the digestive system of my imagination, my instincts told me that I had been at the fight. I had not read about the Gas-man's fall, I had seen it. I had felt the ground shudder and participated in the crowd's collective intake of breath. And I had come under the intoxicating influence of a certain style: from that time on, my own thinking and writing would often be flavoured with pugilistic metaphor.<sup>1</sup>

Insofar as I can write halfway decent prose, or at the very least prose of a certain *gusto*, that is a gift I owe to Hazlitt. That part of me which is less an academic than a journalist – theatre aficionado, reviewer, essayist, popularizer – owes its origin to Hazlitt. And that catholicity, promiscuity, or dilettantism (delete as you consider appropriate) that has characterized my writing life, I also owe to Hazlitt. So thank you.

I think I also owe him my academic career. In my final undergraduate year at Cambridge, there was a new optional special paper on 'Shakespeare and his Influence'. The prescribed topic for its first year was 'Shakespeare and Romanticism'. I took it, and I saw that this was a rich field for graduate work. Although I did not know it at the time, this gave me an advantage during the dark days for higher education of the Thatcherite early 1980s, when jobs in English Literature were as rare as Hazlittian essays without a single Shakespearean quotation. In the year that I took my PhD there were, I seem to remember, two permanent posts advertised anywhere in the United Kingdom. Because I could teach both Shakespeare and Romanticism, I got one of them. And the doctorate duly became expanded into two books. As I have already said, apropos of Michael Foot's kind review, Hazlitt was central to *Shakespearean Constitutions*; he was equally central, in his capacity as both Coleridge's opposite in the lecture room and Keats's literary-theoretical mentor, to the other one, *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination*. It was principally to repay in some small measure those early intellectual debts to Hazlitt that his was the sole life that I was keen to write for the new *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

If it was Hazlitt who made me a writer of sorts, it was Wordsworth who made me a Romantic. I trace that origin to a family holiday in the Lake District, when I was eleven. My favourite photograph in the family album is a faded Kodak snapshot in which I am grinning beside my brother and my father (sprightly, happy, and youthful looking, though nearly sixty) on top of Helvellyn, with the precipitous Striding Edge snaking below us. The next day we visited Dove Cottage and my mother bought me a selection of Wordsworth's poems, and I was hooked.

Given this history, and given that 'My First Acquaintance with Poets' is my favourite Hazlitt essay – or at least my favourite among his more strictly literary essays, with a special place preserved elsewhere in my affections for 'The Fight' and

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1 Jonathan Bate, *The Cure for Love* (London: Picador, 1998), 57.

‘The Indian Jugglers’ – it seems fitting that in my lecture today I should share a few thoughts about Hazlitt on Wordsworth.

‘Gusto’, Hazlitt tells us, ‘is power or passion defining any object’ (iv, 77).<sup>2</sup> Gusto gives ‘the truth of character from the truth of feeling’ (iv, 77). The Hazlittian sensibility begins from the feeling evoked, the emotional response in the viewer of a painting or a landscape, the reader of a poem or a novel, the spectator of a Shakespeare play (or a fight or an Indian juggling act). This emphasis on *power* and on *feeling* must in some considerable measure be derived from Wordsworth’s famous remark in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* about poetry being the spontaneous overflow of *powerful feeling*.<sup>3</sup>

‘Power or passion defining any object’. There is always power in the clarity of Hazlitt’s sentences. There is always passion in the manner in which he conveys enthusiasm (which includes the counter-enthusiasm of being a good hater). Defining *any* object: hence the range of Hazlitt’s powers and passions, as philosopher, painter, art critic, theatre critic, literary critic, literary historian, biographer, political journalist, reviewer, public lecturer, sports writer, memoirist, anatomist of love. The *danger* of starting from gusto is that the passion, the power of feeling, may obstruct or contradict the critical and analytical function. Hence his problem with the later Wordsworth: personal animus undid the work of critical acclamation that came from astute comparative judgment.

Let me step back for a moment. It is fifteen years since I published my biography of another of my Romantic heroes, John Clare (who, as that other great Hazlittian, Tom Paulin reminds us on the Society’s website, called Hazlitt ‘a man of original [sic] Genius’ who died – as Clare believed geniuses habitually died and as he would die himself – ‘neglected & forgotten’).<sup>4</sup> During those fifteen years, while I have been off harvesting other fields, Shakespearean and Hughesian, we have lost any vestige of the idea that there is a canon of Romanticism with Wordsworth at its centre, any privileging of the gentlemen who used to be called ‘the big six’ (actually most of them were either of higher status than gentleman – Byron and Shelley – or lower, Keats and Blake). No one really believes any more in a unified phenomenon called Romanticism. The big change since the time when I studied the Romantics on Shakespeare in the late 1970s has been the dissolution of the canon and especially the recognition of women poets. We now embrace an alternative history of Romanticism that might begin with Wordsworth’s discovery of Charlotte Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets* instead of Coleridge’s discovery of William Lisle Bowles’s contemporaneous sonnets, or with Helen Maria Williams in the heat of the revolution in Paris rather than with Wordsworth meeting Beaupuy in a provincial French town,

2 All quotations from Hazlitt’s work are taken from *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P.P. Howe, 21 vols (London and Toronto: J.M. Dent, 1930–4). References are by volume and page.

3 William Wordsworth, ‘Preface’ to *Lyrical Ballads* (London: Longman & Rees, 1800), xiv.

4 John Clare to J.A. Hessey, September 1830, referring to ‘Hazlitt that I had met & whose writings I had read with so much gratification’ – *The Letters of John Clare*, ed. Mark Storey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 517.

or with Mary Robinson's work as poetry editor of the *Morning Post* instead of Coleridge's role there, and her *Lyrical Tales* of 1800 instead of Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798 and 1800. We used to make lines such as these our touchstone:

There was a boy ye knew him well, ye rocks  
 And islands of Winander & ye green  
 Peninsulas of Esthwaite many a time  
 When the stars began  
 To move along the edges of the hills  
 Rising or setting would he stand alone  
 Beneath the trees or by the glimmering lakes  
 And through his fingers woven in one close knot  
 Blow mimic hootings to the silent owls  
 And bid them answer him. And they would shout  
 Across the wat'ry vale & shout again  
 Responsive to my call with tremulous sobs  
 And long halloos & screams & echoes loud  
 Redoubled & redoubled a wild scene  
 Of mirth & jocund din. And when it chanced  
 That pauses of deep silence mocked my skill  
 Then, often, in that silence while I hung  
 Listening a sudden shock of mild surprize  
 Would carry far into my heart the voice  
 Of mountain torrents: or the visible scene  
 Would enter unawares into my mind  
 With all its solemn imagery its rocks  
 Its woods & that uncertain heaven received  
 Into the bosom of the steady lake [...].<sup>5</sup>

Coleridge certainly did: 'had I met these lines running wild in the deserts of Arabia, I should have instantly screamed out "Wordsworth!"'<sup>6</sup> Now, though, we have learned to consider lines such as these:

Does the night-bird greet me on my way?  
 How much his hooting is in harmony  
 With such a scene as this! I like it well.  
 Oft when a boy, at the still twilight hour,  
 I've leant my back against some knotted oak,  
 And loudly mimick'd him, till to my call

5 Wordsworth MS JJ, the earliest fragmentary version of *The Prelude*; printed in William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1798-1799*, ed. Stephen Parrish (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 87.

6 Coleridge to Wordsworth, from Ratzeburg, 10 December 1798; printed in *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956-71), I, 453.



He answer would return, and thro' the gloom  
We friendly converse held.<sup>7</sup>

That is the character of Rezenvelt speaking in a play by Joanna Baillie, published shortly before Wordsworth wrote his lines, suggesting her influence or at the very least a shared sensibility. Though, if we have to make a comparative judgment, which Hazlitt would have done had he considered the two passages, we would acknowledge the singular genius of Wordsworth's focus not on the 'friendly converse', the answering owl, but on that moment of hanging (at the line ending) in the 'deep silence' when there is no response.

Prior to the late twentieth-century dissolution of the canon and rediscovery of so many women writers, the traditional narrative of Romantic poetry in Britain – setting aside Blake, who has always seemed an outlier, *sui generis* – went like this: Burns as harbinger, Wordsworth–Coleridge–Southey (the 'Lake Poets') as generators, Scott and Byron as bestsellers, then, as Scott turned away from poetry to the novel, Byron's conjunction with Shelley to form the Satanic School and the emergence of the 'Cockney School' of Leigh Hunt, Keats, and the *London Magazine* crowd. With honourable mention, as tail-ender, to the Northamptonshire Peasant Poet. Where does Wordsworth's centrality to this narrative come from? He wasn't regarded as a 'central' poet at the time, in the way that Scott and Byron were. I want to suggest today that you probably know the answer, but perhaps don't fully realize that you know it. Hazlitt, I believe, did more than anyone else – even Coleridge, who can to some degree be discounted precisely because he was so very close to Wordsworth – to establish Wordsworth's position at the centre of the Romantic canon.

In preparing this lecture, I noticed something that I had never noticed before (I don't know if anybody else has noticed it). In terms of eminence, whether measured by sales, reviews, allusions or 'celebrity' broadly conceived, Charlotte Smith, Helen Maria Williams, Mary Robinson, and Joanna Baillie were considerable figures in the two decades before Hazlitt became a critic with the advent of the Regency. But during his active years as a literary critic – let us say 1811 to 1823 (after which he wrote very little about poetry, turning instead to general themes and the life of Napoleon) – I cannot think of *a single enduring volume of poetry published by a woman*.<sup>8</sup> The premature death of Mary Tighe in 1810 marked a watershed. Joanna Baillie was alive and admired, I grant, but the thirty-year gap between her Wordsworth-anticipating *Poems: Wherein it is Attempted to Describe Certain Views of Nature and of Rustic Manners* of 1790 and her Scott-influenced *Metrical Legends of Exalted Characters* of 1821 meant that she flew beneath Hazlitt's radar, save in her capacity as a dramatist.

What of Letitia Landon, you will ask? *The Improvisatrice and other Poems* was published in 1824. Felicia Hemans? *The Forest Sanctuary* was 1825. As I say, Hazlitt ceased to be a critical and reviewing mover and shaker in 1823 – *The Spirit of the*

7 Act 4, scene 1 of *De Monfort*, in Joanna Baillie, *Plays on the Passions* (1798 edition), ed. Peter Duthie (Broadview: Peterborough [Ontario], 2001), 362.

8 A possible exception is Isabella Lickbarrow's Wordsworth-influenced *Poetical Effusions* of 1814, but that had only local impact.

*Age*, published two years later, was a kind of swansong, gathering material much of which had been published in earlier years.

Hazlitt, as several of his best modern readers have reminded us, was a Regency critic, his writing returning again and again not only to critique of the Regent but also to the major literary developments of that decade (Byron's fame, the apostasy of the Lakers, Leigh Hunt's imprisonment, the establishment of *The London Magazine*). He was always alert to new talent. But in the absence of a major new collection of verse by a woman in the Regency, he couldn't find any female poetic talent to extol. This lecture is not the place to ask why women poets such as Robinson and Tighe flourished before the Regency, Landon and Hemans after it, whilst none came to the fore during it. Was Caroline Lamb too busy swooning over Byron and stalking him to become the poet she might have been? How could a woman have made her mark in a decade when it was a rite of passage to express admiration for boxers? To be less flippant, the obvious answer is the turn to fiction: the great female works of the Regency are the entire canon of Jane Austen, Fanny Burney's late masterpiece *The Wanderer*, the later novels of Maria Edgeworth, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The novel had for some time been becoming more and more a female form, Sir Walter excepted. Charlotte Smith and especially Mary Robinson had made more money from their novels than their poems; Lady Morgan's hugely successful *St Clair* of 1804 and *The Wild Irish Girl* of 1806 had led the way, playing an exemplary part in Scott's monumental decision to turn from narrative poetry to historical fiction.

There was a symbolic moment just as Hazlitt became a critic: Anna Barbauld was so shattered by the negative reception in 1812 of her anti-imperial, anti-patriotic poetic satire *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* that she fell silent as a poet. But in 1810 she had effectively become the first person to canonize the novel as a respectable literary form by publishing her 50 volumes of *The British Novelists; with an Essay; and Prefaces, Biographical and Critical, by Mrs Barbauld*. The accompanying 'Essay on the Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing' was a seminal work in the consignment to history of the moralistic idea that novels were inherently mad, bad, and dangerous to know.<sup>9</sup>

Hazlitt recognized in his lecture 'On the English Novelists' that the novel was especially well suited to women: that was because, he said, 'Women, in general, have a quicker perception of any oddity or singularity of character than men, and are more alive to every absurdity which arises from a violation of the rules of society' (vi, 124). He believed that this partly arose 'from the restraints on their own behaviour', but that it was also because 'The surface of their minds, like that of their bodies, seems of a finer texture than ours' – women have 'intuitive perception' and exceptional powers of observation, which is what makes them better novelists than men (vi, 124). In this context, Hazlitt proclaimed that the three leading novelists of the day were Burney, Radcliffe, and Inchbald, though he did give honourable mention to Scott ('the author of *Waverley*') and Godwin

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9 The view exemplified by James Fordyce, *Sermons for Young Women*, 2 vols (1767), I, 148: 'There seem to me very few, in the style of Novel, that you can read with safety.'

(vi, 123–30). I assume that he had not read Austen, who of course published anonymously in her lifetime.

I would suggest, then, that Hazlitt's lectures *On the English Comic Writers* effectively established the canon of the English novel, just as those *On the English Poets* established the poetic canon, and that 'On the Living Poets' enshrined the contemporary poetic canon. If I am right, it would follow that the English Romantic canon became male primarily because there were no decent women poets publishing during Hazlitt's Regency prime. That was not Hazlitt's fault: we should not play a blame game here, in the way that certain modern readers look censoriously upon Hazlitt's writings because of the mess he made of his relationships with women in his personal life.

So much for the absence of women from the Hazlittian poetic canon. What about the presence of Wordsworth? Notoriously, Wordsworth's reputation in the years before and during Hazlitt's career as a literary critic was, to say the least, patchy. Think of Jeffrey's thunderbolts. *The Excursion* of 1814: 'This will never do.'<sup>10</sup> *The White Doe of Rylstone* a year later: 'This, we think, has the merit of being the very worst poem we ever saw imprinted in a quarto volume.'<sup>11</sup> Think, too, of Byron's excoriating attacks. Then read Hazlitt on Wordsworth, beginning with the three-part review of *The Excursion* published in Leigh Hunt's *Examiner*, in August and October 1814. Hazlitt's 'Character of Mr Wordsworth's New Poem' begins: 'In power of intellect, in lofty conception, in the depth of feeling, at once simple and sublime, which pervades every part of it and which gives to every object an almost preternatural and preterhuman interest, this work has seldom been surpassed' (xix, 9).<sup>12</sup> If it had felt fully finished and properly selected, Hazlitt asserts, it would have been a national monument, but it has some of the nakedness and confusion of the Lakeland landscape – 'the rude chaos of aboriginal nature' (xix, 9).

Wordsworth, Hazlitt suggests, was not interested in Claude-like ruins. His mind 'is coeval with the primary forms of things, holds immediately from nature': his focal points were 'a stone, covered with lichens, which has slept in the same spot of ground from the creation of the world', or a thunder-cracked fissure between two mountains, or a 'cavern scooped out by the sea' (xix, 10). No one had written about stones before.

Hazlitt praises *The Excursion* as a 'philosophical pastoral poem' (xix, 10) – something different from, and superior to, the descriptive procession that was typical of earlier pastoral poems (Thomson's *The Seasons* was probably in his mind, much as he – like John Clare – admired it in his youth). Everything in Wordsworth, he argues, is the result of the poet's own reflections on the forms of nature: 'his thoughts are his real subjects' (xix, 10). Hence the solitude of his own heart, as he lives in the deep silence of thought. A seed is sown here for Keats's critique of the egotistical sublime and Byron's damning of Wordsworth's

10 Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review* 24 (November 1814), 1 (unsigned).

11 *Edinburgh Review* 25 (October 1815), 355 (also unsigned).

12 Hazlitt's review of Wordsworth's *The Excursion* was published in *The Examiner* on 21 August 1814, and continued in the issues of 28 August and 2 October 1814.

egotism in *Don Juan*. Similarly, the sequence of the review regarding the Solitary's disillusionment over the French Revolution, his 'loss of confidence in social man', sows the seed for Hazlitt's own critique of Wordsworth's apostasy (xix, 17). Hazlitt turns the 'Immortality Ode' back on Wordsworth by reanimating his own youthful joy at the revolution:

But though we cannot weave over again the airy, unsubstantial dream, which reason and experience have dispelled –

What though the radiance, which was once so bright,  
Be now for ever taken from our sight,  
Though nothing can bring back the hour  
Of glory in the grass, of splendour in the flower:—

yet we will never cease, nor be prevented from returning on the wings of imagination to that bright dream of our youth; that glad dawn of the day-star of liberty; that spring-time of the world, in which the hopes and expectations of the human race seemed opening in the same gay career with our own; when France called her children to partake her equal blessings beneath her laughing skies; when the stranger was met in all her villages with dance and festive songs, in celebration of a new and golden era; and when, to the retired and contemplative student, the prospects of human happiness and glory were seen ascending, like the steps of Jacob's ladder, in bright and never-ending succession. (xix, 18)

The first two parts of the review, published in successive August issues of *The Examiner*, are rich in praise and measured in criticism. But in the third part, the review becomes distinctly unliterary: 'All country people hate each other. [...] They hate all strangers [...]. There is a perpetual round of mischief-making and backbiting for want of any better amusement' (xix, 21–2). What kind of criticism of a poetic epic can this be?

The turn to anti-rural prejudice must be a consequence of that very awkward incident which has led to Hazlitt being branded a rapist. Let me offer a quick biographical recap by way of context.

Hazlitt first met Wordsworth on the joyous visit to Nether Stowey in 1798, which he immortalized twenty-five years later in 'My First Acquaintance with Poets'. But then there was the disastrous visit to the Lakes in 1803. Wordsworth agreed to sit for Hazlitt: if the result was even half as good as Hazlitt's portrait of Charles Lamb, this has to be one of the great lost paintings! During the sittings, Wordsworth read from recent work but he and Hazlitt disagreed over politics, over Newton, Shakespeare, Milton ... Things were getting a little tense. When they went boating together on Grasmere lake, Wordsworth was offended by Hazlitt's suggestion that the local inscriptions in the 'Poems on the Naming of Places' that immortalized favourite spots around the lake might have owed a debt to *Paul and Virginia*, the Rousseauistic French novel that had been translated by Helen Maria Williams, that poet whom Wordsworth so admired in his early years.

Then Hazlitt may have made the mistake of proposing to Dorothy. De Quincey records that ‘Miss Wordsworth had several offers; amongst them, to my knowledge, one from Hazlitt; all of them she rejected decisively’. I find this a little unlikely, De Quincey not being the most reliable witness, though I know that Hazlitt’s biographer Duncan Wu takes it at face value.<sup>13</sup>

The Wordsworths and Coleridge departed for a Scottish tour. Hazlitt went back to Manchester. He returned in October to finish his portraits of the two poets. This time he stayed with Coleridge at Greta Hall. Wordsworth arrived for dinner and they all debated the existence of God. Coleridge was frenzied by Hazlitt’s atheism. Then came the incident.

Hazlitt escapes the bad atmosphere at Greta by going to a local tavern. A girl flirts with him. He misreads flirtation as desire for sex and makes an advance. She calls him a black-faced rascal and the entire pub starts laughing at him and making snide remarks. He makes the fatal error of taking the girl on his knee, lifting her petticoats, and spanking her on the bottom. We would probably now say: committing a sexual assault. They threaten to beat him up. He scarpers back to Greta Hall with an angry mob in pursuit, threatening to give him a ducking. The country people stick together: mischief-making, as he sees it. Coleridge smuggles him out the back and he escapes to Grasmere. Wordsworth shelters him for the rest of the night, gives him clothes and money, and he leaves for Ambleside at dawn, never to return to the Lakes.

The two parts of the review published in August began with high praise and ended with political disillusionment. The latter mood led Hazlitt to begin to think negatively about Wordsworth, with the result that when it came to the third part – published just over a month later, and reading more like a self-contained essay than a continuation of the earlier analysis – he could not resist dredging up the painful memory of his humiliation among the Lake folk. This was a prime example of what I have described as personal animus undoing the work of critical acclamation that comes from astute comparative judgment.

As far as the critical reputation of *The Excursion* was concerned, the attack on country people was a mere distraction. First impressions are what matter most in a review, so ‘this work has seldom been surpassed’ is the memorable thing, the polar opposite of Jeffrey’s ‘this will never do’ published the month after the final part of Hazlitt’s account. But on the personal front there was more trouble ahead. Mary Wordsworth wrote to Dorothy at the end of October, saying that the review would surely benefit the sales of the book, but that the attack on ‘the Mountaineers’ (a lovely phrase for the local people) was, she implied, the result of the incident with the girl, and that Hazlitt was being ungrateful, given that Wordsworth had protected him that night.<sup>14</sup>

13 Thomas De Quincey, ‘William Wordsworth’, *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* VI (1839), 251; Wu’s account of both the supposed proposal and the Keswick incident in *William Hazlitt: The First Modern Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 93–4, 98–9, offers a slightly heady mix of fact and inference.

14 Mary Wordsworth, *Letters*, ed. Mary E. Burton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 24.

Hazlitt in turn felt that Wordsworth was ungrateful for 'the first favourable account that had ever appeared of any work he had ever written.'<sup>15</sup> Benjamin Robert Haydon saw this as the reason for Hazlitt's subsequent negative comments about Wordsworth: 'Wordsworth's utter contempt for his character induced him to take no notice of' Hazlitt's 'fine puffing criticism on the Excursion', with the result that 'Hazlitt now became amazed and, stung at Wordsworth's neglect, thundered forth those attacks on the whole Lake School.'<sup>16</sup>

Hazlitt himself gave an account, at second-hand, of Wordsworth's reaction to the review. It was in his 'Reply to "Z"', written by September 1818, but unpublished in Hazlitt's lifetime. It is a marvellous passage, all too little known and therefore more than worthy of lengthy quotation:

Some time in the latter end of the year 1814 Mr Wordsworth received an *Examiner* by the post, which annoyed him exceedingly both on account of the expence and the paper. 'Why did they send that rascally paper to him, and make him pay for it?' Mr Wordsworth is tenacious of his principles and not less so of his purse. 'Oh,' said Wilson, 'let us see what there is in it. I dare say they have not sent it you for nothing. Why here, there's a criticism upon the Excursion in it.' This made the poet (*par excellence*) rage and fret the more. 'What did they know about his poetry? What could they know about it? It was presumption in the highest degree for these cockney writers to pretend to criticise a Lake poet.' 'Well,' says the other, 'at any rate let us read it.' So he began. The article was much in favour of the poet and the poem. As the reading proceeded, 'Ha,' said Mr Wordsworth, somewhat appeased, 'there's some sense in this fellow too: the Dog writes strong.' Upon which Mr Wilson was encouraged to proceed still farther with the encomium, and Mr Wordsworth continued his approbation; 'Upon my word very judicious, very well indeed.' At length, growing vain with his own and the *Examiner's* applause, he suddenly seized the paper into his own hands, and saying 'Let me read it, Mr Wilson,' did so with an audible voice and appropriate gesture to the end, when he exclaimed, 'Very well written indeed, Sir, I did not expect a thing of this kind,' and strutting up and down the room in high good humour kept every now and then wondering who could be the author, 'he had no idea, and should like very much to know to whom he was indebted for such pointed and judicious praise' – when Mr Wilson interrupting him with saying, 'Oh don't you know; it's Hazlitt, to be sure, there are his initials to it,' threw our poor philosopher into a greater rage than ever, and a fit of outrageous incredulity to think that he should be indebted for the first favourable account that had ever appeared of any work he had ever written to a person on whom he had conferred such great and unmerited obligations. (ix, 6)<sup>17</sup>

15 'Reply to "Z"', quoted below.

16 Benjamin Robert Haydon, *Diary*, ed. W.B. Pope, 5 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960–3), II, 494–5 (September 1824).

'I think', Hazlitt concludes, 'this statement will shew that there is very little love lost between me and my benefactor. If farther proofs are called, I have them at hand, and in a sufficient number' (xix, 6).

The relationship was on a downward trajectory. When Hazlitt reprinted his review in *The Round Table*, he left out much of the praise, including that key first paragraph. Before that, there was a passing remark in an *Examiner* piece of June 1815 in which the consistency of Milton's radical politics was contrasted with the apostasy of Wordsworth in writing 'paltry sonnets upon the royal fortitude' and dropping 'The Female Vagrant' from his *Poems* of 1815 on the grounds that it described 'the miseries of war sustained by the poor' (it was actually a partial omission, but the poem's radical material was indeed excised) (v, 233n.). This piece led Wordsworth to blacken Hazlitt's name around town by sharing the story of the Keswick girl with the gossipy Henry Crabb Robinson.

Quite apart from the personal matter, there was also the fact that Wordsworth had moved from the kind of pantheism suggested by 'Tintern Abbey' to Christian orthodoxy. In a piece published in the *Yellow Dwarf* in January 1818, Hazlitt attacked Wordsworth and his 'brother Kit' – Christopher Wordsworth, orthodox theologian and future Master of Trinity College, Cambridge – because he had been stung by Christopher Wordsworth's negative review in the *British Critic* of Hazlitt's philosophical *Essay on the Principles of Human Action*. The ecclesiastical Wordsworth brother had accused it of undermining the Christian religion and being 'flat Spinozism', its author 'seeming to hold the ancient and impious doctrine of pantheism'.<sup>17</sup> So there were religious-philosophical differences in addition to the political ones.

But, for all this, Hazlitt never attacked Wordsworth outright. In August 1815 in *The Examiner* he dissented on political grounds from Wordsworth's distaste for gypsies, arguing that the value of gypsies was that 'they are an everlasting source of thought and reflection on the advantages and disadvantages of the progress of civilisation' (iv, 46n.). Wordsworth in *The Excursion* described cotton factories as 'a grotesque ornament to the civil order' – for Hazlitt, gypsies were a valuable affront to civil order (iv, 46n.). But then a few months later, again in *The Examiner*, Hazlitt praised the 'sense sublime / of something far more deeply interfused' lines of 'Tintern Abbey' as the finest ever expression of the doctrine of philosophical necessity (though it is more like the doctrine of pantheism from which Wordsworth was by that time trying to detach himself). Hazlitt further said that it was lines like those that made Wordsworth immortal.<sup>18</sup>

He was, then, eminently capable of arguing against Wordsworth without abusing him. In a fascinating passage in the essay on *Romeo and Juliet* in *Characters of Shakespear's Plays*, he suggested that the platonic idea of a pre-

17 Quoted in Robert Woof (ed.), *William Wordsworth: The Critical Heritage: Volume 1: 1793–1820* (London: Routledge, 2001), 368.

18 Relevant extracts, including the quotations and paraphrased points in this and my previous two paragraphs, are helpfully gathered in the magnificent Woof (ed.), *William Wordsworth: The Critical Heritage: Volume 1: 1793–1820*, No. 256: 'William Hazlitt, from his writings, 1815–1818', 879–95.

life in the 'Intimations of Immortality' ode, and Wordsworth's idealization of childhood, came from his lack of interest in the experience of sexual love. Indirectly, this was another defence of his own sexual conduct in the Lakes: 'Desire and imagination are inmates of the human breast' – boyhood and youth are all desire, imagination and freedom, but experience brings us down to the harsh world of reality – we long for a first kiss, but the moment we experience it we begin to feel disillusioned (iv, 250). The sequence reads like a foretaste of *Liber Amoris*: 'The heart revels in the luxury of its own thoughts, and is unable to sustain the weight of hope and love that presses upon it.—The effects of the passion of love alone might have dissipated Mr Wordsworth's theory' (iv, 250). Hazlitt was not to know that this shying away from the matter of romantic love was bound up with Wordsworth's suppression of public knowledge of the Annette Vallon affair. It is ironic that the context of this accusation is Hazlitt's reading of *Romeo and Juliet*, given that Wordsworth had had his own Romeo and Juliet experience, and used the play as a template when he transformed it into poetry in 'Vaudracour and Julia'.

In 1817, Hazlitt astutely compared Rousseau and Wordsworth as the great prose writer and the great poet of feeling, but also of egotism. Egotism was also the bone of contention in an unsigned 'Literary Notice' in the *Examiner* of 22 December 1816, which was quickly identified by Crabb Robinson as being by Hazlitt. He saw him at Basil Montagu's that very day and refused to shake his hand.<sup>19</sup> Here is the passage in question:

The spirit of Jacobin poetry is rank egotism. We know an instance. It is of a person who founded a school of poetry on sheer humanity, on idiot boys and mad mothers, and on Simon Lee, the old huntsman. The secret of the Jacobin poetry and the anti-jacobin politics of this writer is the same. His lyrical poetry was a cant of humanity about the commonest people to level the great with the small; and his political poetry is a cant of loyalty to level Bonaparte with kings and hereditary imbecility [...]. This person admires nothing that is admirable, feels no interest in anything interesting, no grandeur in anything grand, no beauty in anything beautiful. He tolerates nothing but what he himself creates; he sympathizes only with what can enter into no competition with him, with 'the bare earth and mountains bare, and grass in the green field.' He sees nothing but himself and the universe [...]. His egotism is in this respect a madness. (vii, 144)

This was the assault on the Lake Poets that Hazlitt incorporated into his 1818 lecture 'On the Living Poets' – famously, the occasion that gave Keats the idea of distinguishing between Shakespearean negative capability and the Wordsworthian egotistical sublime.

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19 Edith J. Morley (ed.) *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers*, 3 vols (London: Dent, 1938), I, 201.



And yet the principles laid out in 'On Poetry in General', the first of Hazlitt's 1818 Surrey Institution lectures *On the English Poets*, were profoundly Wordsworthian. Poetry is

the natural impression of any object or event, by its vividness exciting an involuntary movement of imagination and passion, and producing, by sympathy, a certain modulation of the voice, or sounds, expressing it [...]. Poetry is the universal language which the heart holds with nature and itself [...] wherever there is a sense of beauty, or power, or harmony, as in a motion of a wave of the sea, in the growth of a flower [here Hazlitt quotes a passage of *Romeo and Juliet* from memory] [...] *there* is poetry, in its birth. (v, 1)

Mere description, the argument goes, is not poetry; poetic language needs 'the heightenings of the imagination' (v, 3):

It is strictly the language of the imagination; and the imagination is that faculty which represents objects, not as they are in themselves, but as they are moulded by other thoughts and feelings, into an infinite variety of shapes and combinations of power [...]. [True poetic language] conveys the impression which the object under the influence of passion makes on the mind. (v, 4)

This is pure Wordsworth and Coleridge, inflected by the theory of the sympathetic imagination outlined in Hazlitt's early philosophical essay.

Equally, although 'On the Living Poets' ends with a lightly revised version of the *Examiner* piece attacking Wordsworthian egotism, it should also be seen as the first of Hazlitt's two major attempts to place Wordsworth squarely at the centre of the English poetic canon. Let me turn to that key lecture. Where does Hazlitt begin? 'I am a great admirer of the female writers of the present day; they appear to me like so many modern Muses' (v, 146). The initial expectation is that the contemporary poetic canon will be female. Hazlitt then begins to name names. He praises Burney, Inchbald and Radcliffe: 'but they are novel-writers' (v, 146). Then, partly in the spirit of friendship, he launches into an encomium of Mary Lamb's *Mrs Leicester's School*: it embodies the school of humanity and 'No one can think too highly of the work, or highly enough of the author' (v, 147). Then he turns to a 'trio of female poets'. He begins with Mrs Barbauld, telling of his admiration when young for her 'Ode to Spring': 'I wish I could repay my childish debt of gratitude in terms of appropriate praise' (v, 147). But he can't: he judges her merely 'a very pretty poetess', I suspect because he hadn't read *Eighteenth Hundred and Eleven*, which fitted his politics exactly (v, 147). Then there is Mrs Hannah More: 'another celebrated poetess, and I believe still living. She has written a great deal which I have never read' (v, 147). It is a good thing a lecture is not an examination essay! But why has Hazlitt not read More's poetry? Because he hates her anti-Jacobin cheap repository tracts, which sold in literally millions. If you wanted a textbook example of the kind of work that Hazlitt loathed, it could be her *Shepherd of Salisbury Plain*, which advocated

piety, patriotism, deference and the acceptance of poverty alleviated only by condescending philanthropy.

The one poet in the female trio whom Hazlitt really admired was the Joanna Baillie of her verse dramas. He expressed the reservation that in her characters she sought to illustrate each of the passions separately from the rest, which he considered to be a heresy in the dramatic art, since drama is always about the mingled yarn of the web of passions. But he saw the strength of *De Montfort*, much preferring the short-lived 1800 Drury Lane production of that play to Coleridge's *Remorse* and Maturin's *Bertram* – he found in the central character 'a nerve, a continued unity of interest, a setness of purpose and precision of outline which John Kemble alone was capable of giving' (v, 147).

Having begun with the women, Hazlitt turned to the living male poets. Rogers: feeble. Campbell: 'the decomposition of prose is substituted for the composition of poetry [...]. He offers the Muses no violence' (v, 149). Tom Moore: better, but too facile, 'an exuberance of involuntary power' (perhaps an Irish characteristic, he hazards) (v, 151). Then to Byron: his poetry 'is as morbid as Mr Moore's is careless and dissipated' (this was, of course, Byron before the anything-but-morbid *Don Juan*) (v, 153). Then Scott: the most popular poet of the day, but without depth, with no breadth, no height – 'neither uncommon strength, nor uncommon refinement of thought, sentiment, or language. It has no originality' (v, 155). So that leaves only one truly great living poet:

Mr Wordsworth is the most original poet now living. He is the reverse of Walter Scott in his defects and excellences. He has nearly all that the other wants, and wants all that the other possesses. His poetry is not external, but internal; it does not depend upon tradition, or story, or old song; he furnishes it from his own mind, and is his own subject. He is the poet of mere sentiment. Of many of the Lyrical Ballads, it is not possible to speak in terms of too high praise, such as Hart-leap Well, the Banks of the Wye, Poor Susan, parts of the Leech-gatherer, the lines to a Cuckoo, to a Daisy, the Complaint, several of the Sonnets, and a hundred others of inconceivable beauty, of perfect originality and pathos. They open a finer and deeper vein of thought and feeling than any poet in modern times has done, or attempted. He has produced a deeper impression, and on a smaller circle, than any other of his contemporaries. His powers have been mistaken by the age, nor does he exactly understand them himself. (v, 156)

Hazlitt grants the failure of *The Excursion* taken as a whole, but tells his audience that they should not judge this poet by his failures. The failure is of the public: 'Mr Wordsworth's poems have been little known to the public, or chiefly through garbled extracts from them.' To compensate for this, Hazlitt quotes the whole of 'Hart-leap Well' to demonstrate Wordsworth's 'beauty and force' (v, 156–61).

Then, however, he offers his reading of the Lake School in general. It is clear, as Haydon discerned, that in attacking the whole school he was primarily wrestling with his attitude to Wordsworth. He regards Southey's epics as 'mechanical and

extravagant, heavy and superficial'; as for Coleridge, he says that the only poem he truly admires is 'The Ancient Mariner' (v, 164, 166). By including in the lecture the critique of the Lake School that had first been aired in an ephemeral review, Hazlitt is once again undoing the work of praise in the earlier part of lecture as a result of the personal and political animus he feels towards Wordsworth.

By 1823, he had mellowed. Golden memory overcomes the bitterness of disillusioned experience (overcomes even the pangs of disprized love provoked by the Sarah Walker affair). 'My First Acquaintance with Poets' was published in *The Liberal* that year:

That morning, as soon as breakfast was over, we strolled out into the park, and seating ourselves on the trunk of an old ash tree that stretched along the ground, Coleridge read aloud, with a sonorous and musical voice the ballad of *Betty Foy*. I was not critically or sceptically inclined. I saw touches of truth and nature, and took the rest for granted. But in the *Thorn*, the *Mad Mother*, and the *Complaint of a Poor Indian Woman*, I felt that deeper power and pathos which have been since acknowledged [...] as the characteristics of this author; and the sense of a new style and a new spirit in poetry came over me. It had to me something of the effect that arises from the turning up of the fresh soil, or of the first welcome breath of Spring. (xvii, 117)

More than anyone else, it had been Hazlitt who first acknowledged the unprecedented 'power and pathos' of Wordsworth, who first recognized that the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* inaugurated an epoch in English poetry. In 'My First Acquaintance', thanks to the memory of Nether Stowey, the personal is reconciled with the literary critical.

The work of the lecture 'On the Living Poets' in establishing a contemporary poetic canon with Wordsworth at its centre was furthered in *The Spirit of the Age*, which might be described as an attempt to establish a broader contemporary cultural canon, in which there was also a place for thinkers such as Bentham and Cobbett, political activists such as Wilberforce and Brougham, and critics such as Jeffrey and Hazlitt's great antagonist Gifford. Scott is the only novelist to be included since, seven years on from the 1818 lecture in which the women novelists held the palm, he has come to dominate the field, being 'the only amanuensis of truth and history' (Godwin is there as a political philosopher, not for his novels) (xi, 63). Byron and Scott are by this time generally regarded as 'the greatest geniuses of the age' (xi, 69). But it is Scott in prose – his verse is now barely mentioned.

The poetic canon in *The Spirit of the Age* consists of Wordsworth, Southey, Byron and Coleridge, together with the lesser figures of Campbell, Crabbe, Tom Moore, and Leigh Hunt. Coleridge is praised for his conversation – in that great serpentine sentence reanimating the Coleridgean voice in full flow – but he is lambasted for his intellectual confusion: 'If our author's poetry is inferior to his conversation, his prose is utterly abortive' (xi, 35). Southey is excoriated for his political apostasy, though Hazlitt grants that he is a superb prose writer. His best poem is said to be the early radical *Joan of Arc*, 'in which the love of Liberty is

exhaled like the breath of spring' – a resurgence here of the language of the 1798 visit to Coleridge and Wordsworth (xi, 82). Byron is bashed for his aristocratic vanity but then famously forgiven in the postscript written when Hazlitt heard news of his death (xi, 69n.). Crabbe is comprehensively dissed, his work said to be repulsive, sickly, querulous, uniformly dissatisfying (xi, 166–7). It will, says Hazlitt, be a thorn in the side of poetry for a hundred years (xi, 169). The best-known contemporary poet of nature is clearly being knocked off his perch so that another, Wordsworth, can be elevated instead.

Having firmly put the rest of the assembled poetic company in their place, Hazlitt is left with none but his flawed hero: 'Mr Wordsworth's genius is a pure emanation of the Spirit of the Age', the essay begins, 'Had he lived in any other period of the world, he would never have been heard of' (xi, 86). His 'levelling muse' speaks better than any other to the levelling age of revolution (xi, 87). His work is seen to be supremely answerable to Hazlitt's definition of poetry, which is as it should be since, as we have seen, that definition was itself shaped by Wordsworth: each object of nature is 'connected with a thousand feelings, a link in the chain of thought, a fibre of his own heart'; each object is, furthermore, linked to the poet's birthplace or to the key moments in his life:

But to the author of the *Lyrical Ballads*, nature is a kind of home; and he may be said to take a personal interest in the universe. There is no image so insignificant that it has not in some mood or other found the way into his heart: no sound that does not awaken the memory of other years. –

'To him the meanest flower that blows can give  
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.'

The daisy looks up to him with sparkling eye as an old acquaintance: the cuckoo haunts him with sounds of early youth not to be expressed: a linnet's nest startles him with boyish delight: an old withered thorn is weighed down with a heap of recollections: a grey cloak, seen on some wild moor, torn by the wind, or drenched in the rain, afterwards becomes an object of imagination to him: even the lichens on the rock have a life and being in his thoughts. He has described all these objects in a way and with an intensity of feeling that no one else had done before him, and has given a new view or aspect of nature. He is in this sense the most original poet now living, and the one whose writings could the least be spared: for they have no substitute elsewhere. The vulgar do not read them, the learned, who see all things through books, do not understand them, the great despise, the fashionable may ridicule them: but the author has created himself an interest in the heart of the retired and lonely student of nature, which can never die. (xi, 89)

In that last sentence, the critic becomes a prophet. Hazlitt recognizes that Wordsworth's true reputation has yet to be established. But he predicts that his genius will never die. The poems are there, waiting to create, as Coleridge put it, the taste by which they will be enjoyed.

Of course Coleridge was crucial to the canonization of Wordsworth. And De Quincey played an important role, especially at the level of biographical myth-making and in the intuition that came from his being one of the few people other than Coleridge and Wordsworth's family to have read *The Prelude* when it was fresh. But in the literary critical and historical process of *placing* the poet, of shaping taste and offering judgements that would influence the taste of posterity, it was above all Hazlitt who began to shift the canon of English Romantic verse and to give Wordsworth his privileged place as the purest poetic emanation of the spirit of the age.

When Hazlitt was in his critical prime, the seven canonical poets were probably the following: Scott, whose narrative poems sold nearly 120,000 copies; pre-*Don* Byron, whose *Childe Harold* and Turkish tales sold about 100,000; Campbell, whose *Pleasures of Hope & Gertrude of Wyoming* sold about 45,000; Rogers, whose *Pleasures of Memory* and other poems achieved a comparable figure; Southey, over 30,000 sales, and the award of the Laureateship in 1813; Tom Moore, *Lalla Rookh* and *Loves of the Angels* just under 30,000; Crabbe, about 25,000. In addition to these figures, each of whom had a significant body of poetic work over a period of many years, there were the 'nine days' wonder' poets – Bloomfield's 100,000 and Kirke White's 20,000. Hazlitt's takedown in *The Spirit of the Age* of Scott's poetry, Byron, Campbell, Rogers, Crabbe, Southey, and Moore was intended to empty the canon, to clear the space for Wordsworth, who, as he said, was barely known – as may be seen from his paltry sales figures (*Lyrical Ballads*, 1798: 500 mostly unsold; second edition: 1000; third edition: 500; *Poems in Two Volumes*, 1807: 1000 of which 230 remaindered by 1814; *The Excursion*, 1814: an edition of 500, 291 of which sold immediately, a further 114 by 1820, and a further 8 in the next thirteen years).<sup>20</sup>

It took time for Hazlitt's faith in Wordsworth to fructify into the claim that he was the only modern poet worthy to stand beside Shakespeare and Milton. That only came with Mill, Arnold, Ruskin, George Eliot, Sidgwick, Leslie Stephen, F.W.H. Myers, and other Victorian intellectuals, not to mention John Muir in America and the Frenchman Emile Legouis, who was the first, in the 1890s, to perceive the greatness and centrality of the posthumously published *Prelude*. That is another story, but one that could not have taken place without its beginning in the extraordinary critical power and the impassioned prose of William Hazlitt.

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20 All sales figures from William St Clair's remarkable *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).



## SITTING ON HAZLITT'S KNEE

*Jon Cook*

A little over ten years ago, I published a short biography called *Hazlitt in Love*. It was about a notorious episode in Hazlitt's life, his love affair with Sarah Walker that began in 1820 and ended, unhappily for Hazlitt at least, in 1823. In the same year he published *Liber Amoris*, a thinly disguised autobiographical account of his passion. The thin disguise certainly didn't work. I doubt that Hazlitt intended that it would conceal anything. The book caused a scandal. A controversial presence in English literary and political culture before 1823, Hazlitt now found himself a reviled figure. Although there were a few defenders of the book, the critical consensus at the time of its publication was that it constituted a moral and aesthetic offence.

Why I chose to write biographically about this moment in Hazlitt's life is still not altogether clear to me. Why not, instead, add to the growing body of critical interpretation of the *Liber Amoris*, one that would engage with questions about its structure (odd and fragmentary); its genre (a confession, a case study, an echo of eighteenth-century epistolary fiction); or its language or tone (I sometimes wonder if it isn't a forensic enquiry into the language of passion, of how vulnerable someone can become to its formulae and the fictions of love it brings in its train)? One motive that does seem clear to me is a standard one. I wanted to write biographically in order to test the veracity of Hazlitt's account of the affair in *Liber Amoris*. In doing that, I also wanted to do something similar with the other rumours and eye-witness accounts that swirled around Hazlitt's life during this period of his life. But veracity here didn't mean simply being true to whatever facts could be discovered about who did what and when and to whom. My notion of veracity also involved an idea of fairness, of being true to the various participants in the story. This seemed especially important given what the story was about, a sexual scandal, an affair between a middle-aged man and a woman 'half his age'. Episodes of this kind usually attract strong projections from whoever claims to know or judge them. They provide opportunities for condemnation and for prurient fantasy. So one task for a biographer might be to work in this knowledge and avoid getting on too many high horses.

Undertaking this work necessarily involved coming to terms with the tradition of Hazlitt's biography, one that was well-established by the time I wrote my book. Biographical traditions are passed on in different ways. They produce attempts at revision in the light of new scholarship. They can also impose powerful and

often unconscious assumptions about how a particular life story is to be told. In Hazlitt's case, one assumption has been that his meeting with Sarah Walker was a climactic, if not, *the* climactic episode in his life. It looms large and attracts all kinds of excitement. Catherine Maclean in her 1943 biography of Hazlitt, *Born Under Saturn*, devotes the long and final section of her book to the affair. It has a title of its own, 'The Passion', and this is divided into different phases, each with its own heading: first 'The Frenzy' and then 'The Recovery', before coming to a final section, 'The End of the Way', which covers the post-affair years leading up to Hazlitt's death. Maclean depicts the love affair as a turning point, a madness, a trauma. The Hazlitt who emerges from this experience is not the same person who first fell in love. Later, in Irving Wardle's biography, first published in 1971, the pursuit of intensity produces tabloid headlines. One of the three chapters that Wardle devotes to the episode has the title, in capitals, 'REJECTED'. The writing and publication of *Liber Amoris* is framed as 'A Catharsis' (another chapter title); Hazlitt purges himself of the destructive passion that consumed him by writing about it, the text is an antidote to a mental and emotional poison. The book's purpose is understood as a psychological necessity rather than an artistic choice. In the most recent and most authoritative life of Hazlitt by Duncan Wu the tone is less obviously exclamatory. Wu gives the chapters he devotes to the affair a title, 'The New Pygmalion', that is taken from the subtitle of *Liber Amoris*. It implies a kind of irony discussed later in this essay. But the temptations of hyperbole are not far away. Writing of Sarah Walker's behaviour towards the two men, Hazlitt and John Tomkins, who were both courting her, Wu describes her as a 'game player with no power besides the attraction she exerted over the men passing through her parents' boarding house. [...] Her deception was monstrous and begat monsters.'<sup>1</sup>

My own book followed this tradition. 'Madness' is a title of one of its chapters, dealing with the period when Hazlitt and his first wife, Sarah, were both in Edinburgh pursuing a divorce in the Scottish courts. But in using the title, I wanted to draw attention to the fact it was not just Hazlitt who seemed to be losing his sanity. In a journal entry for 17 June 1822, Sarah Hazlitt made a brief entry about a walk by a canal, when she felt 'as if I should go mad'.<sup>2</sup> One reason, if not justification, of this tabloid-style treatment comes from other contemporary sources. In Hazlitt's letters to his friend and confidant, Patmore, written during the period of his affair with Sarah, he repeatedly described himself as threatened with madness: 'What I have suffered since I parted with you?', he wrote to Patmore on 29 May 1822, 'a raging, gnawing fire in my heart and my brain that I thought would drive me mad'.<sup>3</sup> The painter, Benjamin Haydon, a keen observer of Hazlitt's appearance and behaviour, described a meeting with him in a diary entry of August 1822: 'Hazlitt called last night in a state of absolute insanity about the girl

1 Duncan Wu, *William Hazlitt: The First Modern Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 314.

2 W.H. Bonner (ed.), *The Journals of William and Sarah Hazlitt, 1822-1831* (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo University Press, 1959), 228.

3 H.M. Sikes, W.H. Bonner and G. Lahey (eds.), *The Letters of William Hazlitt* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 260.



who jilted him,<sup>4</sup> and, in a letter written in the same year about the composition of *Liber Amoris*, he initiated the idea that the book was a cathartic act, written to 'ease his soul' of the burden of his failed love affair. The stakes could not be higher, according to Haydon, if the book failed in its therapeutic purpose: 'He will sink into idiotcy if he does not get rid of it.'<sup>5</sup> The risk of a possibly temporary state, 'absolute insanity', turning to something permanent, 'idiotcy', is one indication of how fragile he thought Hazlitt had become.

These examples of how biographical narrative and interpretation become embedded in a tradition of writing about Hazlitt's life raise a wider and well-known question. It has to do with the repeated telling of a life and the idea that biography is essentially a revisionary act. There is always some version of a life that biography confirms or questions. This is not simply a matter of the interpretation of particular events or actions. It encompasses the conventions that, once established, begin to organize how a life is turned into a narrative, with its varying hierarchies of emphasis and evaluation. What is difficult, in practice, is to acknowledge how far this can go. If, for example we trace back the biographical recounting of Hazlitt's love affair with Sarah Walker, there are a number of contemporary and retrospective sources that are drawn on in creating the story. They include Haydon's journals and correspondence, P.G. Patmore's memoir, B.W. Procter's autobiographical fragment, the journal kept by Hazlitt's first wife, and Hazlitt's own letters and journal entries. There are, for any biographer, significant gaps in the record: virtually nothing from Sarah Walker herself, apart from a brief letter sent to Hazlitt in January 1821, and nothing from Hazlitt's successful rival, John Tomkins. But, amongst this array of sources, one in particular has come to dominate biographical reconstruction, and that is the work Hazlitt wrote about the love affair, *Liber Amoris*. Here we encounter a paradox: a work whose publication was an event in the story of Hazlitt and Sarah Walker becomes itself a powerful source for the telling of that story. It occupies two dimensions at once: both content and frame, a lens and what is seen through it. It is life writing as simultaneously biography and autobiography.

There are, of course, a set of biographical protocols for dealing with this kind of problem. The partiality and selectivity of *Liber Amoris* needs to be acknowledged, its versions of events set alongside others. This is the judicial view of biography and one of its ethical touchstones. It has been clearly stated by Richard Holmes in his book, *Footsteps*:

[...] all real biographical evidence is 'third party' evidence; evidence that is witnessed. Just as the biographer cannot make up a dialogue, if he is to avoid fiction; so he cannot really say that his subject 'thought' or 'felt' a particular thing. When he uses these forms of narration it is actually a type of agreed

4 W.B. Pope (ed.), *The Diary of Benjamin Robert Haydon*, 5 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), II, 375–6.

5 F.W. Haydon, *Benjamin Robert Haydon: Correspondence and Table Talk*, 2 vols (London: Chatto and Windus, 1876), II, 181.

shorthand, which must mean – if it means anything factual – that ‘there is evidence from his letters and journals, or his reported conversations, that he thought, or that he felt, such-and-such a thing at this time [...]’ In this way the biographer is being continually excluded from, or thrown out of, the fictional rapport he has established with his subject.<sup>6</sup>

The problem, in the case of Hazlitt and his love affair, is what happens when one of the sources, *Liber Amoris*, itself made up of letters, journals, and reported conversations, is halfway between a documentary source and a work of fiction. Is it a gift to the biographer or a poisoned chalice?

What is at stake here can be illustrated by an example from the text, one that draws attention to the difficulties involved in blurring the distinction between *Liber Amoris* as a work of literature and as a biographical source. In the long and fictional letter to J.S.K. that comes at the end of *Liber Amoris*, Hazlitt, or H as he is called in the text, writes about the end of his affair. He returns from Edinburgh, where he had arranged a divorce from his wife in the belief that this would leave him free to marry the person he had become convinced would be the love of his life. H has also convinced himself that it is his married status that has constituted a major obstacle on the part of Sarah or S to accepting him as her lover. He comes back to the lodging house in Holborn in a state of feverish expectation, only to be rejected by S. H responds to this rejection with disappointed fury. He tramples on the cameo that holds a locket of her hair, smashes the little statue of Napoleon that had become a curious love token between them, and, as Hazlitt wrote in *Liber Amoris*, ‘shrieked curses on her name, and on her false love’ (ix, 145).<sup>7</sup> He rushes out of the lodging house into the streets of Holborn, then calms down and returns.

The fictional letter then goes on to tell of the conversation H has with S’s father. H is trying to do a number of different things in this conversation: regain some dignity, repair the damage he has done, and solicit the father’s sympathy for his plight. The conversation between them combines efforts to show how things had really happened with all kinds of special pleading. It gets drawn into a vertiginous question that runs through the whole text: what counts as a proof of love? How would a third party be convinced that what he or she is witnessing is evidence of love between a couple? What if the one sits on the other’s knee? This, H says, is what S has done, and, moreover, S’s father knows this because he has glimpsed them together in this way. What he may not have noticed is how often this happened, as H, in wounded justification, tells him: ‘Well, then, Sir, I can only say that as you saw her sitting then, so she had been sitting for the last year-and-a-half, almost every day of her life, by the hour together’ (ix, 146).

Read as a sentence in a literary text, H’s claim raises various possibilities for response and interpretation. It echoes an earlier episode in *Liber Amoris*, cast in

6 Richard Holmes, *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer* (1985; London: Harper Press, 2011), 68–9.

7 All references to Hazlitt’s works are taken from *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P.P. Howe, 21 vols (London and Toronto: J.M. Dent, 1930–4). References are by volume and page.

the form of a dialogue between H and S and called 'The Quarrel', when there is a dispute about whether S's actions, and these include sitting on H's knee 'for a year together', are evidence of love, or as S insists, of friendship (ix, 106). Taken together the two scenes become a part of the book's presentation of the issues that torment H: what is a sign of love; if there are such signs, are they, by the same token, signs of commitment; and what happens when there is a refusal to agree that an action must mean one thing and not another. But the book is also about what this torment leads H to, a kind of madness perhaps, but also, as is clear from the narrative of *Liber Amoris*, to exaggeration. Any half-attentive reader will know that what H says about 'the last year-and-a-half', cannot be true because the book tells us about the long separation of the two lovers as H goes off in pursuit of his divorce in Edinburgh. Hyperbole of this kind has become a deeply ingrained part of H's linguistic habits, veering as they do between outbursts of either ecstatic hope or desperate unhappiness. It is a feature of the text, read as literature, that we think about the significance of this kind of hyperbole in relation to the emotion it expresses. We don't just think about the words as the report of an event. If love blinds, then the linguistic habits associated with love are what do the blinding, making H incapable of seeing the reality of the young woman he pursues. Or, and this is part of a discomfiting honesty in *Liber Amoris*, we read the words in their immediate context and see them as a desperate ruse by a middle-aged man to gain an ally in his manipulation of a young woman.

These responses to *Liber Amoris* can be developed in a number of ways. They point to a persistent and queasy ambivalence that the text creates in response to the hapless H. He simultaneously repels us with his manipulations and self-absorption at the same time as he attracts sympathy for the suffering that he endures. He falls in love, or convinces himself that he has, and then appears to act with great tact, sensitivity, and generosity towards his beloved, only to discover that he has made an engine of misery that turns him into a kind of monster. The figure of the creative artist, 'the New Pygmalion' of *Liber Amoris*'s subtitle hovers uneasily around this story. H, like the mythical Pygmalion, creates an image that he wants then to make flesh. In doing this he also wants to invent a future life both for himself and for S. The text relentlessly exposes the fact that H's inventions of S will never gain the purchase on her that H hopes they might have. The 'new Pygmalion' turns flesh to stone while intending to do the opposite. This motif echoes another and much better-known work, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, subtitled *The Modern Prometheus*. Both are ironic modernizations of ancient myths and both explore the making of monsters and the havoc they create. But *Liber Amoris* works deliberately on a smaller scale. It is about volatile emotions building up in confined spaces, not epic encounters between the creator and his creation in the Alps or in Arctic wastes.

To think in this way about this episode from *Liber Amoris* is to interpret it as a literary text and to acknowledge that it is part of its identity as a literary text that there will be other interpretations that might agree or disagree with mine. But what happens when this same episode is treated as a biographical source? A.C. Grayling in his biography, *The Quarrel of the Age: The Life and Times of William Hazlitt*

(2000), shows how readily the slip from an episode in a work of literature to an apparently empirical statement of fact can occur. In his chapter on Hazlitt's affair with Sarah Walker – appropriately, given the tradition, called 'Love and Disaster' – Grayling writes about the aftermath of their first meeting: 'For eighteen months after Sarah's sinuous walk and meaningful look captivated Hazlitt, she spent hours every day in his room, sitting on his knee, kissing and fondling him endlessly, and being fondled in return.'<sup>8</sup>

This sentence, whatever else it is doing, is a statement of biographical report. It tells us what happened, when it happened and for how long. Grayling does not offer any footnoted sources for this sentence, but one, very obviously, is at work, H's indignant statement in *Liber Amoris* to S's father about his daughter's behaviour. There she is again, but this time it's not H's knee she's sitting on, but Hazlitt's. He has become the unwitting author of his own biography as Grayling, perhaps unconsciously, echoes the words of *Liber Amoris* in his own text. But there's another source at work as well, also unacknowledged. It comes from another acquaintance of Hazlitt's, the journalist and playwright, B.H. Procter, and was published as an autobiographical fragment in 1877. 'Her movements in walking', he wrote about Sarah Walker, 'were very remarkable, for I never observed her make a step. She went onwards in a wavy, sinuous manner, like the movements of a snake.'<sup>9</sup> We can begin to analyse Grayling's sentence into a series of elements, all of them relying on two sources. The 'sinuous walk' comes from Procter; the eighteen months of knee-sitting and fondling from *Liber Amoris*, as does the meaningful look, but this time from the earlier part of the book that I mentioned before, the dialogue called 'The Quarrel' when H remonstrates with S about her equivocal behaviour: 'Yet the first time I ever asked you, you let me kiss you: the first time I ever saw you [...], you turned full round at the door, with that inimitable grace with which you do everything, and fixed your eyes full upon me, as much as to say, "Is he caught?"' (ix, 107).

This example points to a problem in biography that goes well beyond A.C. Grayling's life of Hazlitt. The Sarah Walker of the 'sinuous walk and the meaningful look' is quite clearly a textual creation, born out of Hazlitt and B.H. Procter, by way of Grayling himself. Once we have noticed this genealogy, something else becomes painfully obvious: that all three of these progenitors are men, and that all three of them are clearly in the grip of a fantasy about Sarah Walker as a temptress, a femme fatale gliding through the corridors and rooms of a lodging house in early nineteenth-century Holborn. That might not matter, or rather, it would matter in a different way, if Sarah was just a textual creation, a character in a novel. But she wasn't. She once had a life, a consciousness, a capacity for suffering and pleasure, and the challenge both to biographical tact and to biographical imagination is to be aware of this, to be aware, that is, that beyond all the textual sources, there is, or once was, a person. This is as true of someone who has an abundant textual

8 A.C. Grayling, *The Quarrel of the Age: The Life and Times of William Hazlitt* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2000), 263.

9 B.W. Procter, *An Autobiographical Fragment and Biographical Notes* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1877), 181–2. Procter describes Hazlitt as being 'substantially insane' for some of the time he was in love with Sarah Walker.

record whether authored by themselves, by others or by both as it is of Sarah about whom very little is known.<sup>10</sup> One of the central dilemmas of biography is that it must in some way go beyond its sources while refusing the temptation to simply make things up.

In discussions of biography, there is a comment on this problem that has canonical status. It comes from Virginia Woolf's essay, 'The New Biography', first published in 1927. Agreeing that the aim of biography is the 'truthful transmission of personality', Woolf goes on to identify a difficulty that confronts this kind of writing:

On the one hand there is truth; on the other, there is personality. And, if we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these two into one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one and that we need not wonder if biographers have for the most part failed to solve it.<sup>11</sup>

If, for the moment, we accept Woolf's conditional and agree that that the distinction between the granite and the rainbow does describe a major and, perhaps, crippling problem in biography, then something else about the example from A.C. Grayling becomes evident. When I began the research for *Hazlitt in Love* I had, without being fully aware of it, fallen under the spell of *Liber Amoris* and accepted H's version of that eighteen months of daily knee sitting as a version of the biographical truth. But it didn't take long to discover that it wasn't that at all. There was no 'granite-like solidity' in that 'last year-and-a-half' of Hazlitt's or Grayling's 'eighteen months'. There was for Sarah no sitting on Hazlitt's knee 'almost every day of her life, by the hour together'. The biographical record makes more emphatically true what *Liber Amoris* will tell us: that the wounded and insulted H is wildly exaggerating the continuity of his relationship with S to advance a claim upon her with her father. Within a few weeks of their first meeting in August 1819, Hazlitt had left London to spend time at Winterslow Hut, the coaching inn near Salisbury Plain he used as a writer's retreat. Nor was this an exception. He was away again in late 1820 and early 1821 for at least six weeks, visiting his family in Devon, and staying again in Winterslow. In June 1821 the pattern repeated itself. Hazlitt was back at Winterslow Hut, failing to meet a deadline for an article he had promised for the *London Magazine*. He continued to shuttle back and forth between London and Winterslow for the next six months, before leaving for Edinburgh early in 1822. To qualify for a divorce in Scotland he had to spend a minimum of forty days living

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10 Charles Nicholl has written a valuable biographical essay charting Sarah Walker's life after her affair with Hazlitt. See Charles Nicholl, 'A Being full of Witching' in *The London Review of Books*, 22.10 (18 May 2000), 15–18. The essay is reprinted under the title "'My Infelice": In Search of Sarah Walker' in Nicholl's *Traces Remain: Essays and Explorations* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 186–204.

11 Virginia Woolf, *Selected Essays*, Oxford Worlds Classics edition, ed. D. Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 93.

there. He did not return to London until 17 May where he met with a cool reception from Sarah before going back to Edinburgh at the end of the month.

At this point we might want to argue that the biographical record of Hazlitt's relation with Sarah Walker reveals a truth that can be overlooked or only glimpsed at in the pages of *Liber Amoris* or in certain biographical sentences about what happened to Hazlitt and to Sarah after their first meeting. But the more interesting question is, what kind of truth? At one level we can think of this as simply truth to fact and, then, of the biographer's obligation to that truth. Hazlitt wasn't pretending to be in Winterslow Hut when he wrote letters to his editor, John Taylor, from there, any more than he was pretending to be in Crediton in Devon in December 1820 with his mother and sister. There are biographical records apart from Hazlitt's correspondence to show that his travels away from London between 1820 and 1822 were not some elaborate ruse on his part to cover up for the fact that all the time he was really being fondled by Sarah Walker in his lodgings in Southampton Buildings.<sup>12</sup> The oddity of A.C. Grayling's sentence in his biography of Hazlitt is that if we read further into his book, it's clear that he knows this truth. But something about a fantasy of being with a young woman alone in a room, seducing and being seduced, and not just once but repeatedly, resists that truth, immunizes the sentence from the facts that surround it.

This question of the function of fantasy in writing biography leads us to the other side of Woolf's dichotomy between the granite and the rainbow. Here we encounter the troubling force of that conditional, 'if we think of'. If we do think of truth in that way, then one of the central aims of biography according to Woolf, 'the truthful transmission of personality', becomes elusive and, perhaps, impossible. Truth to the biographical record will not lead the biographer to the truth of personality. If it is to be discovered at all it will have to be found by another route. One way of thinking about this is as a question of meaning. We discover 'personality' when we discern the meanings that a life had to the person who led it, to the others who were close to that person, and, in some but not all cases, to a wider public who valued a life and its expressions in one way or another. If this is true then biography is clearly an art of interpretation because it is through acts of interpretation that we discover meanings. But this, in turn, raises a number of complicated questions about who or what is doing the interpreting, and what if any ethical questions arise when what is being interpreted is a life that is understood as something more or other than a text.

These fascinating questions have been often discussed and they cannot be followed through in any detail in the space of this essay, but certain things can be noted that are thrown into relief by this line of enquiry.<sup>13</sup> One of these is an

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12 See, for example, the brief letters written to him by Sarah Walker and sent to Renton Inn in Berwickshire, quoted in Hazlitt's letter to P.G. Patmore, March 1822 (Hazlitt, *Letters*, 239) and another letter written by Sarah to Hazlitt when he was at Winterslow Hut in January 1821, quoted in Stanley Jones, *Hazlitt: A Life. From Winterslow to Frith Street* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 316–17.

13 See, for example, Michael Holroyd, 'The Case Against Biography', 'Smoke with Fire', and 'What Justifies Biography' in *Works on Paper* (London: Little, Brown & Co., 2002),

obvious point about biographical traditions, where they exist, as is clearly the case with Hazlitt's life. As well as accumulating the biographical facts, the 'granite-like solidity' that Woolf identifies, they are also forms of interpretation, endlessly returning to the 'rainbow-like intangibility' of 'personality'. If we think of the tradition as working in this way then it can, in turn, be understood as the occasion of a healthy revisionism: each age needs to understand anew the lives it finds significant; the 'truth of personality' is elusive but needs to be constantly pursued. The question of when this pursuit distorts the truth has been very interestingly discussed by Hermione Lee in her essay, 'Virginia Woolf's Nose'. Commenting on the controversy about the depiction of Woolf's life and death in the film, *The Hours*, she discerns a benign process at work and one that is true to Woolf's own understanding of the self's multiplicity:

Does it matter if the film's version of Virginia Woolf's life story prevails for a time? There is no one answer. Yes, because it distorts and to a degree misrepresents her, and for any form of re-creation, of any significant life, in any medium, there is a responsibility to accuracy. No, because she continues to be reinvented – made up, and made over – with every new adapter, reader, editor, critic and biographer. There is no owning her, or the facts of her life.<sup>14</sup>

Lee's analysis suggests that the benefits of biographical reinvention outweigh the costs. In the case of a writer like Woolf, it keeps the question of who she was not only open but elusive. It prevents her capture in a single version of her life.

But there is another possibility, one where the biographical tradition gets stuck and fixated. This is likely to occur with any episode – Hazlitt's affair with Sarah Walker is an example – where sex or drugs or scandal is involved. They are also likely to be about situations where the impulse to blame someone is particularly strong, and, therefore, to depict the self as wilful, manipulative, and calculating (the just target of blame); or guileless, passive, and innocent (hence a self that can justly blame another). A biographical loop repeats itself, one that is often characterized by polarized judgements: Hazlitt is either a sexual predator or an emotionally vulnerable middle-aged man; Sarah is either a scheming temptress or the victim of a prolonged campaign of sexual harassment and coercion. The way the story gets told will often be dictated by which side the biographer takes. The effect of tradition in this case is to create a stereotype that is hard to question, and even harder to abandon. Yet the role of good biography might be to do just this, to complicate judgement by showing that Hazlitt could be both predatory and vulnerable, that Sarah could have been a flirt and an innocent victim. There is a distinct and, perhaps, troubling kind of *biographical* knowledge at work here, one that reveals how very differently the same person can be in the course of a day or

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3–32; Jacques Rancière, 'The Historian, Literature, and the Genre of Biography' in *The Politics of Literature*, translated by J. Rose (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 168–82.

14 Hermione Lee, 'Virginia Woolf's Nose' in *Body Parts: Essays in Life Writing* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2005), 44.

a week or a year. It has been epitomized by the biographer, Richard Holmes, in his comment on one of his subjects, Coleridge, who, on the same day, could be in a state of disarray and despair in the morning, and overwhelming his companions with his conversation in the evening.<sup>15</sup>

When I wrote *Hazlitt in Love* I knew I wanted to write about Hazlitt and Sarah Walker without recourse to the blame game. I also wanted to rescue some of the other people involved from what E.P. Thompson, writing about the history of the English working class, called 'the enormous condescension of posterity'.<sup>16</sup> The person who came into greatest prominence for me here was Hazlitt's first wife, Sarah. She kept a diary of her stay in Edinburgh while she was going through the divorce that her husband had instigated. It shows what kinds of risks she was running in doing this, but also the intelligence and honesty of her engagement with her husband's moods and demands. Then, of course, there was the question of all those absences. As I worked on the chronological sequence of the biographical story, their frequency and duration became clear to me. The record of what happened became a little straighter by drawing on the granite-like facts that Woolf thinks are essential to any good biography. But there was something intangible at work in these absences as well. If not 'rainbow-like', it certainly began to disclose a 'truth of personality'. In his absences from Sarah, Hazlitt's fantasies luxuriated. Sometimes they were full of hopeful constructions of his future life with her; more often, they were jealous and sexually alarmed thoughts about what she might be doing while he was away. On Sarah's side there was something equally telling, an almost complete silence in her correspondence with Hazlitt. He was someone she did not want to contact. His own noisy response to her silence seemed to be a means to drown out that fact, to deny that she had rejected him.

Whether *Hazlitt in Love* succeeded in any of these aims is not for me to say. What hindsight has told me about the book is that it was too timid in relation to the biographical tradition. One thing that struck me as I researched the history of the affair was how contrived it all was, how much, that is, Hazlitt had made it all up and obstinately persisted in his inventions. I didn't make this clear because I wanted to respect the seriousness of his passion and the suffering it caused him and others. But the sense of invention, or perhaps, of acting out, would not go away.

This was connected to, but was also something more than the fact, recorded and analysed in the book, that Hazlitt, by the time he met Sarah Walker, held pessimistic views about authors and love. His experience with Sarah only intensified them as is evident in a letter of advice he wrote to his son, written in 1822 and published in 1825 as part of the Paris edition of *Table-Talk*:

The natural and instinctive pattern of love is excited by qualities not peculiar to artists, authors, and men of letters. [...] Authors [...] feel nothing

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15 Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Darker Reflections* (London: Harper Collins, 1998), 221–5.

16 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963), 12.



spontaneously [...] Nothing stirs in their blood or accelerates their juices or tickles their veins. Instead of yielding to the first natural and lively impulse of things [...] they screw themselves up to some far-fetched view of the subject in order to be intelligible.<sup>17</sup>

Hazlitt's relationship with Sarah Walker was an experiment in the truth or falsity of these convictions. What might be at stake in the experiment becomes clear in a letter he wrote to P.G. Patmore early in 1822 from Edinburgh. Writing about his journey to the city, he recalled a brief stay he made at Stamford where he embarked on a new work: 'On the road down I began a little book of our conversations, i.e. mine and the statue's. You shall see it when I come back.'<sup>18</sup> In *Liber Amoris* a slightly modified version of the same letter is included: 'I have begun a book of our conversations (I mean mine and the statue's), which I call *Liber Amoris*' (ix, 117).

Sarah's nickname, the 'statue', in this correspondence is just one of a number that Hazlitt gave her. It indicates that *Liber Amoris*'s subtitle, 'The New Pygmalion', was already stirring in the writer's imagination, as was a way of sardonically naming Sarah that would be appropriate to an exchange between two men about the fact that one of them was having 'woman trouble'. But it reminds us of something else as well. During his absences from Sarah, Hazlitt was not just fantasizing about her. He was also planning about how to put her into a book. *Liber Amoris* presents itself as a retrospective account of a failed love affair. In the book's advertisement, its anonymous author presents himself, by way of a well-established device, as an editor who has inherited an intimate manuscript from a man now dead, that sets out the history of a 'fatal attachment'. Setting Hazlitt's actual correspondence alongside the adapted and invented correspondence that goes into *Liber Amoris* underlines something that the book mentions in passing. Hazlitt was writing about his love affair before it was over, not exactly as if it was doomed, but certainly as if it was fated to become a text. The inventions this created – Sarah as the 'statue', for example – drew him to imagine it as the disaster that it turned out to be.

This fact about the chronology of the composition of *Liber Amoris* returns us to the enigmatic relationships that can exist between the lived and the written life. Hazlitt's sense that writers 'feel nothing spontaneously', that they 'screw themselves up to some far-fetched view of the subject', gives us an insight into one dimension of his love affair with Sarah Walker and to the sense of its contrivance. It may be that Hazlitt fell in love with Sarah in order to be able to write about the experience. *Liber Amoris*, not marriage, is the bizarre consummation of their affair. To acknowledge this contrivance is not necessarily to diminish his suffering or her embarrassment. The performance of an emotion is often a way into a conviction of its reality. But it does help in an understanding both of *Liber Amoris* and, perhaps, of Hazlitt himself. The form of the book produces an effect of forensic detachment, as if it was a gathering of materials for a case study. It is at once inside and outside the emotions it documents. Making Hazlitt into H and Sarah into S is not so much

17 Hazlitt, *Letters*, 233.

18 *Ibid*, 246.

an attempt at disguise as a device for creating the distance that anonymity can give. In Hazlitt's case the doubleness is of a different kind. Living in order to write, he came to an acute awareness of how this fact transformed the character of the writer's experience. It was always preparatory to its remembrance or its analysis in a written text. As such, it was waiting upon the contrivance, the 'making up and making over', that the act of writing inevitably brings, and Hazlitt was aware of this while he engulfed himself with his passion for Sarah.

I failed in my book to give sufficient emphasis to this double-sidedness, to the relation, that is, between acting out and writing up. Like other Hazlitt biographers, I had been too deeply engaged by Hazlitt's own projection of his affair in the working and reworking of it that is *Liber Amoris*. This is where the excitable and crisis-ridden treatments of this episode in his life come from: the emphasis on madness and catharsis, the idea that this episode was a major turning point, that the Hazlitt before it was a different person from the Hazlitt after. But perhaps he wasn't. The first Mrs. Hazlitt claimed that she had seen her husband behave like this before. Throughout the affair, with only one small break, Hazlitt continued to write. The essays that he produced for *Table-Talk*, published in 1821, are judged by many of his readers to be amongst the best of his work. He continued to write prolifically once the affair was over and married Isabella Bridgewater, a wealthy widow in 1824. They separated in 1827, but, again life and Hazlitt's writing went on until his death in 1830.

There is a danger as well as an opportunity for the biographer in this thought about the ongoing character of a life. On the one hand it threatens to dissolve the significance of any episode in a life into the facts of chronology: the days pass, things change, nothing much matters. On the other it does allow further thought on a crucial dimension of biography and life-writing, that it will discover what, from one perspective or another, will make a life exemplary. Hazlitt was preoccupied with this question. The 'contemporary portraits' gathered in *The Spirit of the Age*, first published in 1825, are so many attempts to find what is idiosyncratic in his subjects – Jeremy Bentham, for example, with 'his walk almost amounting to a run, his tongue keeping pace with it in shrill, clattering accents' (xi, 6) – and in the same portrait, discern what it is typical: in Bentham's case again, his dedication to reducing 'the mind of man to a machine' (xi, 6).

Another function of biographical traditions is to establish what is exemplary in a life. In Hazlitt's case, this has meant amongst other things, establishing his identity as a Romantic writer. At least two assumptions are at work here: one is that male Romantic writers will typically have an episode of doomed or dangerous love in their lives; another is that their writing will be to an unusual degree autobiographical. Both assumptions are as fascinating as they are questionable. In Hazlitt's case the danger is that these assumptions will foreclose something that makes him different from the canonical Romantic writers. He was, for most of his working life, a professional author who earns a sometimes precarious living entirely from what he published. His practice as a writer informed his life intimately and, as he was nothing if not self-conscious, he speculated on the psychological effects of this dedication. Writing, in Hazlitt's case, did not occur as a reflection or

summary of lived experience. It anticipated and informed it. It is even possible to argue that he came to life in his writing in a way that he did not in other aspects of his life. Thought of in this way, his love affair with Sarah becomes exemplary in another way. It points to the curious doubling of consciousness that informs Hazlitt's experience of the affair. He was observing himself having at the same time that it was happening, anticipating his suffering in writing before he experienced it in his role as Sarah Walker's lover.

Is it possible to imagine a biography of Hazlitt that does not make much of his affair with Sarah Walker? I'm not sure. But sitting on Hazlitt's knee does become an epitome of the biographer's dealings with fact and fiction, sources and their interpretation, and the dictation that a biographical tradition can produce. It is worth asking who is sitting on Hazlitt's knee – Sarah, S, or some fantasy construction of both – and whose knee she is sitting on: Hazlitt's, H's, or the biographer's.

UNIVERSITY OF EAST ANGLIA



# HAZLITT ON IDENTITY

## The Inveterate Self and Social Change

*John Whale*

### I

In this essay I wish to focus on Hazlitt's ideologically astute sense of the role that custom and habit play in our sense of self. In his various writings about identity there is a recurrent concern for the recalcitrant workings of the self and a profound understanding of how this might stand in the way of social change. Hazlitt's work provides a sustained insight into this less creative aspect of the Romantic-period self. His writing is at times peculiarly attentive to the inverse of the celebrated Romantic tendency to champion the power of self-consciousness. His enquiries into the self often lead him into those areas of custom and habit where such awareness is notable for its absence. For obvious reasons, we have come to think of writers from this period as the providers of epiphanies of self-consciousness whereas what I wish to engage with here are Hazlitt's representations of the self which are concerned with various kinds of limit and which often have a tendency to show our habitual and even characteristic lack of psychological insight or our incapacity for profound self-realization.

As Hazlitt puts it in 'On the Knowledge of Character': 'For the most part, we are stunned and stupid in judging of ourselves' (viii; 316) and, in the same essay, 'A man's whole life may be a lie to himself and others' (viii, 303).<sup>1</sup> Even the more famous strand of Hazlitt's thinking – about the workings of genius – contains this idea of unconscious ignorance: 'The works of the greatest genius are produced almost unconsciously, with an ignorance on the part of the persons themselves that they have done any thing extraordinary. Nature has done it for them' (viii, 316). These representations of limit and incapacity in our understanding of ourselves are important for appreciating Hazlitt's wider role as a social and political commentator. In his enquiry into the paradoxical argument of the *Political Essays* of 1819, Paul Hamilton has described Hazlitt's "battle" for "the good old cause" against superstitions, prejudices, traditions, laws, usages which are "enshrined in the very

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Hazlitt are taken from *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P.P. Howe, 21 vols (London and Toronto: J.M. Dent, 1930–4). References are by volume and page.

idioms of language”.<sup>2</sup> My attention here is on the psychological equivalents, on how Hazlitt attempts to get the measure of the psychological underpinning to the ideology he experiences and opposes as a citizen and a critic.

For many of his critics, the *locus classicus* of Hazlitt’s representation of the self is his 1805 philosophical treatise, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action*, which takes as its *raison d’être* the limit of our selfishness. As A.C. Grayling and others have pointed out,<sup>3</sup> Hazlitt’s optimistic project here early in his career was to find the redemptive capacity in the sympathetic imagination that might allow us to escape from the moral confinement of our self-interest. He does so by focusing on the way in which we can only envisage our future self – since it does not yet exist – through an act of imagination. His further assertion is that this act is exactly the same as sympathizing with another person.<sup>4</sup> It is an argument he takes up and deploys more generally against both utilitarianism and the Malthusian thesis on population.<sup>5</sup> At the other end of the spectrum to the closely argued work of philosophy which constitutes his 1805 *Essay* is *Liber Amoris* (1823) – a formally experimental autobiography comprising closet drama, prose narrative, extensive quotation, epistolary correspondence, and intimate memoir in which the passion of love is shown to radically transform the self.<sup>6</sup> *Liber Amoris* charts the disturbing metamorphosis of the self under the influence of passion or imagination and is radically ambivalent as to whether this constitutes success or failure, while the 1805 *Essay* finds a positive solution to the logic of our capacity to imagine our future selves.

If these two dramatically different texts have understandably played a key part in defining our sense of Hazlitt’s exploration of identity, they don’t tell the whole story of his wrestling with the difficulty of the self’s relationship to social change and to ideology. In what follows I wish to examine Hazlitt’s exploration of the less spectacular and darker territory of the inveterate self, an enquiry which leads

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- 2 See Paul Hamilton, ‘Paradoxical Argument: Hazlitt’s *Political Essays* of 1819’, *The Hazlitt Review* 4 (2011), 33.
  - 3 See A.C. Grayling, *The Quarrel of the Age: The Life and Times of William Hazlitt* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2000), esp. 362–5 and “A nature towards one another”: Hazlitt and the Inherent Disinterestedness of Moral Agency’ in *Metaphysical Hazlitt: Bicentenary Essays*, ed. Uttara Natarajan, Tom Paulin and Duncan Wu (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 151–9; David Bromwich, ‘Disinterested Imagining and Impersonal Feeling’ in *Metaphysical Hazlitt*, 17–29.
  - 4 See A.C. Grayling “A nature towards one another” in *Metaphysical Hazlitt*, 158.
  - 5 See Stephen Burley, *Hazlitt the Dissenter: Religion, Philosophy, and Politics 1766–1816* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 148–60; John Whale, ‘Hazlitt and the Selfishness of Passion’ in *Metaphysical Hazlitt*, 56–60.
  - 6 See Jon Cook, *Hazlitt in Love: A Fatal Attachment* (London: Short Books, 2007); Sonia Hofkosh, ‘Broken Images’, *Nineteenth-Century Prose* 36.1 (Spring 2009), 27–54; John Barnard, ‘Hazlitt’s *Liber Amoris; or the New Pygmalion* (1823): Conversations and the Statue’ in *Translating Life: Studies in Transpositional Aesthetics*, ed. Shirley Chew and Alistair Stead (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 181–98; Robert Ready, ‘The Logic of Passion: Hazlitt’s *Liber Amoris*’, *Studies in Romanticism* 14.1 (Winter 1975), 41–57; John Whale, ‘*Liber Amoris*: Unmanning the Man of Letters’, *Nineteenth-Century Prose* 36:1 (Spring 2009), 55–76.

him to an appreciation of how we very often work according to prejudices and habits that militate against transformation either in the self or in the larger frame of society. A.C. Grayling touches briefly on the challenge posed by this aspect of Hazlitt's writing evident in what he refers to as the 'pessimistic and dispirited moral tone of his *Plain Speaker* essays'.<sup>7</sup> Grayling is keenly aware of the threat offered by these writings to Hazlitt's thesis of our inherent disinterestedness and our '*natural benevolence*'.<sup>8</sup> The extent of Hazlitt's enquiry, as we shall see, extends well beyond that famous volume and across the next decade. While there are undoubtedly elements of personal disappointment as well as pessimism informing these various essays, I would like to focus on their political implication, particularly their contribution to social critique. Kevin Gilmartin has suggested that a 'committed historical progressivism was central to Hazlitt's radical expression, though [...] even in the social and political sphere, progress was subject to troubling reversals and countervailing forces'.<sup>9</sup> These resistant aspects of character and identity constitute one of these 'countervailing forces,' playing as they do a key role in supporting and maintaining the prevailing ideology. For Hazlitt the disappointed radical and the disappointed lover, one might say they represent the biggest challenge of all. They constitute the basis of human behaviour which works unconsciously against the prospect of social transformation.

## II

In his essay 'On Personal Character,' first published in *The London Magazine* in 1821, Hazlitt articulates what is perhaps one of his most pessimistic statements about our capacity for change. His epigraph from Montaigne establishes the tone for what follows: 'Men palliate and conceal their original qualities, but do not extirpate them' (xii, 230). Beginning unapologetically and somewhat surprisingly with reference to novels as 'repositories of the natural history and philosophy of the species' and with Henry Fielding's characters Master Blifil and Tom Jones as his examples (though, revealingly, the tenor of the essay leans towards the former as the more pertinent example), he takes up the recently published German phrenologists Franz Joseph Gall (1758–1828) and Johann Gaspar Spurzheim (1776–1832) and extends their study of 'essential difference of character' into what he considers to be the wider domain of 'character' (xii, 231). This includes his reference not just to family physical resemblance, but to the sharing of the same emotional characteristics: 'the same turn of mind and sentiments, the same foibles, peculiarities, faults, follies, misfortunes, consolations, the same self, the same everything!' (xii, 233). And Hazlitt extends this view by reference to hitherto separated family members who find themselves mirrored in the faces and emotional responses of their long-lost relatives (xii, 233). The explanation he provides is that 'the stuff of which our blood and humours are

7 See A.C. Grayling, "A nature towards one another" in *Metaphysical Hazlitt*, 151–4.

8 *Ibid.*, 151.

9 Kevin Gilmartin, *William Hazlitt: Political Essayist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 310.

compounded [is] the same' (xii, 233). This in turn leads him on to the view that 'the colour of our lives is woven into the fatal thread at our births: our original sins, and our redeeming graces are infused into us [...] nor is the bond, that confirms our destiny, ever cancelled' (xii, 233). Similarly, later on in the essay, he asserts that:

The disease is in the blood: you may see it (if you are a curious observer) meandering in their veins, and reposing on his eye-lids! Some of our foibles are laid in the constitution of our bodies; others in the structure of our minds, and both are irremediable. (xii, 237–8)

As he pushes on with this rather fatalistic, biological line of argument, it is perhaps unsurprising that he adverts to race and species in dangerous proximity: 'Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?' (xii, 240).

This essentialist and reactionary perspective on the individual leads Hazlitt into a disappointed view of the current political situation. One can see at this point in his writing a strong correlation between the two things. His representation of the self mirrors his view of social change. After deciding that '[i]n truth, almost all the characters of Hogarth are of the class of incorrigibles,' Hazlitt 'wonders what has become of some of them' (xii, 240) and speculates that they must still be present in his own contemporary society, having not been 'swept away, like locusts, in the whirlwind of the French Revolution,' though he admits that some may have been 'modernised a little' (xii, 240). This leads him to a more general statement about the abiding pretence of social reality which returns us to the epigraph from Montaigne: 'We may refine, we may disguise, we may equivocate, we may compound for our vices, without getting rid of them'; and on this basis, he concludes that 'we may, in this respect, look forward to a decent and moderate, rather than a thorough and radical reform' (xii, 241). On this pessimistic premise he ventures a more generalized view on the prospect of social change. Even when in his personal disappointment Hazlitt writes about the culture of his contemporary society as if it is a deceit played out by human actors, this sense of a prevailing sham is at one with his propensity for ideological critique. The perspective he offers at such moments is clearly that of the disappointed revolutionary.

As the essay moves towards its conclusion, Hazlitt at least realizes how far his subscription here to a model of the self as inveterate and unchanging – and one which has its seeds in our infancy – pushes him towards a reactionary position not just in the political field but in the theological or metaphysical realm. There is some hint of regret and perhaps even a sly or arch self-consciousness as he finds himself in alignment with the Calvinist position of predestined election and original sin. Attracted as he is to a drama of negative instincts and corrosive forces within the self in this essay, he even rewrites the Wordsworthian maxim that 'the child is the father of the man,' and turns its subversive, psychologically revelatory potential into a kind of fatalism:

Can we doubt that the character and thoughts have remained as much the same all that time; have borne the same image and superscription; have grown



with the growth, and strengthened with the strength? In this sense, and in Mr Wordsworth's phrase, 'the child's the father of the man' surely enough. (xii, 231)

The dejected and disappointed tone of the essay leads Hazlitt into a melancholic withdrawal from social interaction, albeit one which is positively disposed in its isolated self-improvement and in its toleration of personal differences. The admission at the end that he has been led down a potentially dangerous line of thought is at least heartening, as is his reminder of his capacity for a lively contrariness – his agreeing with a 'salvo' or caveat:

I do not know any moral to be deduced from this view of the subject but one, namely, that we should mind our own business, cultivate our good qualities, if we have any, and irritate ourselves less about the absurdities of other people, which neither we nor they can help. I grant there is something in what I have said, which might be made to glance towards the doctrines of original sin, grace, and election, reprobation, or the Gnostic principle that acts did not determine the virtue or vice of the character; and in those doctrines, so far as they are deducible from what I have said, I agree – but always with a salvo. (xii, 241)

Spurred on by his recent engagement with the German phrenologists, Hazlitt is at least willing to engage with some of the challenges of the new psychology and to test out how its suppositions might stand in the way of reform. In his thorough-going enquiry into 'character', he is willing to entertain and even allow for those aspects in the constitution of the self which might doggedly resist improvement.

Hazlitt continued his anguished investigation into 'character' in an essay published in *Table-Talk* in 1822, entitled 'On the Knowledge of Character'. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this piece is his repeated admission that such knowledge is difficult to obtain. There is a strong sense here of the melancholy view that we must remain forever strangers to ourselves and to our closest associates. The splenetic force of the essay manifests itself in an extraordinarily negative depiction of the relationship between friends, family, lovers, the sexes, and even the different social classes. In particular, it produces some of his most unattractive commentaries on women and of the uneducated lower classes. His focus is once again on the nature of prejudice and social hypocrisy and this leads him into a consideration of the inveterate and fixed nature of character and from there into some rather challenging views of love-at-first-sight and on physical appearance ('first impressions') as the true judge of people's characters:

There are various ways of getting at a knowledge of character – by looks, words, actions. The first of these, which seems the most superficial, is perhaps the safest, and least liable to deceive: nay, it is that which mankind, in spite of their pretending to the contrary, are generally governed by. [...] This sort of *prima facie* evidence, then, shows what a man is, better than what he says

or does; for it shows us the habit of his mind, which is the same under all circumstances and disguises. (viii, 303, 304)

Once again, in this continued engagement with the idea of character, Hazlitt finds himself subscribing to views of the self and also to views of society which are profoundly unprogressive. Admittedly, there is something of a performance here in his own writing – what one might describe as a self-flagellating realization of falling in with the wrong side in the debate about our selves and, as a consequence, destroying the prospect of achieving both personal and social change. Assessing this unattractive side of Hazlitt in the fraught context of *Liber Amoris*, Gregory Dart has suggested that this essay might be construed as containing ‘a note of self-conscious exaggeration’ and he describes it as ‘designedly irascible in places.’<sup>10</sup> I would concur with Dart’s perception that Hazlitt ‘the disappointed idealist’ might here ‘be deliberately seeking to redress a previous imbalance.’<sup>11</sup> It can certainly be seen as part of a more wide-ranging and concerted attack in Hazlitt’s writing on customary or habitual assumptions. At the very least there is some mischievous relish in challenging expectations and in turning the tables on polite liberal assumptions as to the nature of identity. There is also something refreshing – perhaps even invigorating – about experiencing an inverse or reverse view of things. Hazlitt the provocative essayist looks to disturb the surety or complacency of his reader, in contrast to the philosopher of the 1805 *Essay* who is more intent on establishing the consistency of his argument on our natural disinterestedness.

Hazlitt’s lashing out against the culture of the author and of literary celebrity here prepares the ground for an extraordinary conjuring of the self according to these peculiarly negative perceptions. There is perhaps a democratic principle of returning hallowed authors back to the domain of ordinary, even dull, uninteresting people in this manoeuvre, but it is more noteworthy for its emptying-out through inversion of the identity of the writer – a particularly painful iconoclasm if we think of how ‘My First Acquaintance with Poets’ offers its own more reserved iconoclastic revision of his former poetic idols. In a dramatic, even melodramatic, passage Hazlitt presents an apparently anonymous figure who, as he gains definition, comes close to being autobiographical, before drawing the reader into the very fabric of the essay and then deflecting away again with a swerve towards Coleridge – here represented by ‘C---’. The very movement of this passage captures something distinctive about the nature of Hazlitt’s negative definition of identity, its deceptive movement, its substitutive capacity, and its painful recognition of anonymity. This is far from the idea of prized self-consciousness based on self-autonomy or a higher level perception leading to self-realization and it is pointedly directed at an iconic, lionized representative at the heart of that literary culture:

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10 Gregory Dart, *William Hazlitt: Liber Amoris and Other Writings* (Manchester: Fyfield Books/Carcenet, 2008), 163.

11 *Ibid.*, 163.

You say, there is Mr ----, undoubtedly a person of great genius: yet, except when excited by something extraordinary, he seems half dead. He has wit at will, yet wants life and spirit. He is capable of the most generous acts, yet meanness seems to cling to every motion. He looks like a poor creature – and in truth he is one! The first impression he gives you of him answers nearly to the feeling he has of his personal identity; and this image of himself, rising from his thoughts, and shrouding his faculties, is that which sits with him in the house, walks out with him into the street, and haunts his bedside. The best part of his existence is dull, cloudy, leaden: the flashes of light that proceed from it, or streak it here and there, may dazzle others, but do not deceive himself. Modesty is the lowest of the virtues, and is a real confession of the deficiency it indicates. He who undervalues himself is justly undervalued by others. Whatever good properties he may possess are, in fact, neutralized by a ‘cold rheum’ running through his veins, and taking away the zest of his pretensions, the pith and marrow of his performances. What is it to me that I can write these *TABLE-TALKS*? It is true I can, by a reluctant effort, rake up a parcel of half-forgotten observations, but they do not float on the surface of my mind, nor stir it with any sense of pleasure, nor even of pride. Others have more property in them than I have: *they* may reap the benefit, *I* have only the pain. Otherwise, they are to me as if they had never existed: nor should I know that I had ever thought at all, but that I am reminded of it by the strangeness of my appearance, and my unfitness for every thing else. Look in C----’s face while he is talking. His words are such as might ‘create a soul under the ribs of death.’ His face is a blank. Which are we to consider as the true index of his mind? Pain, languor, shadowy remembrances are the uneasy inmates there: his lips move mechanically! (viii, 304–5)

The premise underlying Hazlitt’s acerbic commentaries in ‘On the Knowledge of Character’ is that the culture he inhabits – particularly literary culture – is a fraud, a deceit, and that the identity of the author within it has been drained of vitality so as to become a disturbing phantom. This is a view which he expresses in various forms in the period following his disastrous attempt at a relationship with Sarah Walker. It features strongly in a number of his *Table-Talk* essays and in the various writings related to *Liber Amoris*, including ‘The Fight’ and ‘On the Conduct of Life; or, Advice to a Schoolboy’.<sup>12</sup> In the original letters which went to form the latter we are informed that authors:

12 In ‘On the Aristocracy of Letters’ Hazlitt laments: ‘There is not a more helpless or more despised animal than a mere author, without any extrinsic advantages of birth, breeding, or fortune to set him off’ (viii, 210), while in ‘On the Disadvantages of Intellectual Superiority’, he claims: ‘We speak another language, have notions of our own, and are treated as of a different species’ (viii, 280). His worry about inhabiting a sham culture is evident in his statement in ‘On the Disadvantages of Intellectual Superiority’ that: ‘One of the miseries of intellectual pretensions is, that nine-tenths of those you come into contact with do not know whether you are an impostor or not’ (viii, 284) and his extension of the idea in ‘On Patronage and Puffing’ that ‘Life itself is a piece of harmless quackery’ (viii, 298).

feel nothing spontaneously. The common incidents and circumstances of life with which others are taken up, make no alteration in them [...]. Nothing stirs their blood or accelerates their juices or tickles their veins [...]. Their minds are a sort of Herculeum, full of old petrified images;— are set in stereotype, and little fitted to the ordinary occasions of life.<sup>13</sup>

In this particular essay, it produces a strongly fatalistic sense of identity and an excoriating attack on the identity of the literary author. One of the most shocking assertions for literary scholars is Hazlitt's claim regarding the work of John Donne: 'I have a higher idea of Donne from a rude, half-effaced outline of him prefixed to his poems than from any thing he ever wrote' (viii, 304).

If the extremity of Hazlitt's essay 'On the Knowledge of Character' contemplates the destruction of the very poetic culture he helped to canonize, it also has the capacity to illustrate the force of its case by reference to another scene of annihilation. One of the most interesting passages in this essay is its consideration of the self in relation to what Hazlitt refers to as the 'abstract idea of a murderer'. It is another example of his defining the self *in extremis*. It presents a characteristically Hazlittian reflection on the nature of the self – one of his many powerful recognitions of the way in which the self is defined through limit and, at the same time, through its powerful instinct for self-preservation. This doubling up so as to provide a revelatory recoil back into the self takes the following form:

In my opinion, no man ever answered in his own (except in the agonies of conscience or of repentance, in which latter case he throws the imputation from himself in another way) to the abstract idea of a *murderer*. He may have killed a man in self-defence, or 'in the trade of war', or to save himself from starving, or in revenge for an injury, but always 'so as with a difference', or from mixed and questionable motives. The individual, in reckoning with himself, always takes into the account the considerations of time, place, and circumstance, and never makes out a case of unmitigated, unprovoked villany, of 'pure defecated evil' against himself. [...] So there is a story of a fellow who, as he was writing down his confession of a murder, stopped to ask how the word *murder* was spelt; this, if true, was partly because his imagination was staggered by the recollection of the thing, and partly because he shrunk from the verbal admission of it. (viii, 314)

This is a fascinating pre-Freudian moment of eruption in writing or rather a moment of the impasse or break-down in the perception of writing where the self's selfishness leads to its refusal to be translated or placed in the category of the guilty or the condemned.

Hazlitt's 1828 essay 'On Personal Identity' offers further demonstration of his definition of identity by pushing it to its limit – in this case its refusal, on the

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13 *The Letters of William Hazlitt*, ed. H.M. Sikes, W.H. Bonner, and G. Lahey (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 233–4.

grounds of self-preservation and self-value, to engage in precisely those flights of metamorphosis and empathy which we have come to identify with Romantic creativity. It begins with that commonplace trope in the popular imagination – that of substituting one's self for someone more favourably circumstanced. It is articulated with the help of Pliny's example of Diogenes and Alexander and, importantly, it is accompanied by a reminder that this manoeuvre for Hazlitt – and, he would have it, for all of us – is a point of extremity. It is an example which serves to demonstrate his definition of identity by pushing at its limit. Such a substitution represents 'the utmost point at which our admiration or envy ever arrives':

'If I were not Alexander, I would be Diogenes!' said the Macedonian hero; and the cynic might have retorted the compliment upon the prince by saying, that, 'were he not Diogenes, he would be Alexander!' This is the universal exception, the invariable reservation that our self-love makes, the utmost point at which our admiration or envy ever arrives – to wish, if we were not ourselves, to be some other individual. No one ever wishes to be another, *instead* of himself. We may feel a desire to change places with others – to have one man's fortune – another's health or strength – his wit or learning, or accomplishments of various kinds — [...] but we would still be our selves, to possess and enjoy all these, or we would not give a doit for them. (xvii, 264)

This movement from Diogenes to a doit – from an extravagant gesture towards Classical renown to an almost worthless coin embedded in common parlance signals the brake on mobility in Hazlitt's thinking. We come to a characteristically material, tangible, and idiomatically expressed stop in the form of this persuasive resistance to exchange.

Hazlitt's next example in this essay drives home his point about extremity and offers us a sharpened definition of the self. The value placed on our sense of identity, he suggests, is greater than that between the poorest and the richest in his society. A beggar might imagine being in possession of all the finery, pomp, and wealth of a king, but he does so, Hazlitt claims, only in so far as the comparison is with himself and not *instead* of himself:

If the meanest beggar who crouches at a palace-gate, and looks up with awe and suppliant fear to the proud inmate as he passes, could be put in possession of all this finery, the pomp, the luxury, and wealth that he sees and envies on the sole condition of getting rid, together with his rags and misery, of all recollection that there ever was such a wretch as himself, he would reject that proffered boon with scorn. He might be glad to change situations; but he would insist on keeping his own thoughts, to *compare notes*, and point the transition by the force of contrast. He would not, on any account, forego his self-congratulation on the unexpected accession of good fortune, and his escape from past suffering. All that excites his cupidity, his envy, his repining or despair, is the alternative of some great good to himself; and if, in order to

attain that object, he is to part with his own existence to take that of another, he can feel no farther interest in it. (xvii, 265)

Once again Hazlitt's philosophical point is driven home with a demotic illustration of self-conscious autonomy: 'he would insist on keeping his own thoughts, to *compare notes*'.

Just how much such a substitution is – in Hazlitt's view – the very limit, or the *ne plus ultra*, of our capacity to imagine ourselves – or, rather, our incapacity to imagine or act in furtherance of the extinction of ourselves – is clinched in his next comparison where he offers his own interpretation of ancient Greek mythology. This is a pointedly humanist rendering of Classical culture. For Hazlitt, the various famous transformations in that mythology are construed as consolations in the face of our annihilation:

It is an instance of the truth and beauty of the ancient mythology, that the various transmutations it recounts are never voluntary, or of favourable omen, but are interposed as a timely release to those who, driven on by fate, and urged to the last extremity of fear or anguish, are turned into a flower, a plant, an animal, a star, a precious stone, or into some object that may inspire pity or mitigate our regret for their misfortunes. Narcissus was transformed into a flower; Daphne into a laurel; Arethusa into a fountain (by the favour of the gods) – but not until no other remedy was left for their despair. It is a sort of smiling cheat upon death, and graceful compromise with annihilation. It is better to exist by proxy, in some softened type and soothing allegory, than not at all – to breathe in a flower or shine in a constellation, than to be utterly forgot; but no one would change his natural condition (if he could help it) for that of a bird, an insect, a beast, or a fish, however delightful their mode of existence, or however enviable he might deem their lot compared to his own. Their thoughts are not our thoughts – their happiness is not our happiness; nor can we enter into it except with a passing smile of approbation, or as a refinement of fancy. (xvii, 265–6)

Here, Hazlitt relegates metamorphosis to a form of consolation. Given his focus on the primacy and irreducibility of personal identity he does not thrill, as John Keats so famously did sometimes in his letters and in his poems, to the prospect of projective imaginative empathy. To be translated into the form and being of another creature is anathema to Hazlitt. In his view, to take part in the existence of a bird, insect, beast, or a fish is very much a last resort rather than a longed-for imaginative transformation. Here, Hazlitt seems intensely aware – and wants his readers to be acutely aware – of the prospect of human separateness and wishes his homology of the self to include that kind of absolute difference which only the relatively new knowledge of natural history in the form of Linnean classification can assign to the idea of a 'species'. His description of Classical transformations as 'a sort of smiling cheat upon death, and graceful compromise with annihilation' foregrounds a paradox in which the aesthetic is a secondary and fanciful order of things, the self, primary and absolute.

## III

These essays on character and identity spanning the 1820s are representative of a sustained strand in Hazlitt's writing. They might easily be read as symptoms of his melancholia or indeed his splenetic response to his deep-seated unhappiness at this point in his personal life. They might also be seen to be at odds with the moral conclusion of our capacity for disinterestedness or benevolence reached in the 1805 *Essay*. But they are, I would argue, consistent with Hazlitt's thoroughgoing exploration of both the social and the personal or psychological character of his time, one which leads him into some dangerous territories, particularly for a liberal thinker committed to wider social change. Understanding precisely what it was which motivated and engaged people through opinion, habit, and even prejudice was a key requirement for a cultural commentator like Hazlitt. Only then might one fully appreciate how ideology functioned. The very workings and the limits to social change might be found by attempting to identify those aspects of the self which might resist all pushes towards transformation.

Hazlitt's achievement in the 1805 *Essay on the Principles of Human Action* lay, as we have seen, in establishing a credible counter to the supposed inherent selfishness of our human nature. Against the more generally proclaimed tendency of his age's engagement in acts of the sympathetic imagination which are deemed to be the precursors to our own contemporary culture's celebration of empathy, Hazlitt's repeated ground is the limit of our selves and even more, I would argue, the capacity we have in moments of crisis or challenge to fall back into our selfishness and into the reactionary descriptions of character that support it. It is the spectre of this backsliding that acts as a spur to much of Hazlitt's writing about identity and the self, just as in his related political reflections, he is assiduous in imagining a return to monarchy post-Waterloo and is equally vehement in his rejection of Malthus's argument about population. In all cases, the offence offered to our human nature is its reduced status as a result of defining it by our animal nature whether through the idea of heredity in monarchy, or its capacity for sexual reproduction in the case of Malthus, or indeed by reference to its fixed and instinctive self-preservation in the case of selfishness. In this respect, I would argue, the effort involved in the proclaimed philosophical achievement of his 1805 *Essay* was something which in Hazlitt's view demanded to be repeated throughout his career. In terms of the self, then, as much as for 'legitimacy', his writing might be described as being on permanent watch for the return of the enemy.

Hazlitt's profound recognition of the power of custom and his recognition of habit and 'prejudices [...] transmitted like instincts' can make him appear at times anything but the enlightened rationalist philosopher in search of a disinterested truth or even the committed republican rooting out the threats to reform (viii, 313). In pursuit of the power of habit he is in danger of not just recognizing its force, but of endorsing it with his essentialist views of the self. At the same time, Hazlitt's concerted attempts to account for the hold of habit on our minds and on our behaviours provides a valuable insight into its role in society – and particularly its tendency to militate against both social and psychological change.

If this sometimes exposes the unattractive underside to Hazlitt's acute ideological awareness, he is, I would argue, the writer in the second decade of the nineteenth century who is the most profoundly aware of the ideological workings of power in the popular mind and in the culture at large. He is particularly alert to its capacity to reconstitute itself out of the ruins of reform and the failed prospect of a republic in the example of Revolutionary France. This is why – post-Waterloo and post-Napoleon – he so frequently cries out against the almost spectral figure of 'the hag, Legitimacy'<sup>14</sup> – aware as he is of monarchy's capacity to silently and insidiously creep back into life at every opportunity, to take nourishment and grow from the smallest seed. In his engagement with habit, prejudice, and 'small things', Hazlitt maintains his passionate commentary on the workings of psychology and power.<sup>15</sup> As he expresses it in *The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte* when contemplating the Inquisition in Italy: 'The whole science and study of social improvement may be reduced to watching the secret aim and rooted purpose of power, and in opposing it step by step and in exact proportion to the obstinacy of its struggles for existence' (xiii, 263). Hazlitt's articulation of the spectral power of monarchy and its capacity to renew itself from the smallest relics of its ruination remains a pertinent insight into the workings of ideology. In ascribing to monarchical legitimacy the identity of a 'spirit' he also alerts us to our susceptibility to the customary imagination and the powerful part it can play in the process of familiarizing and thus naturalizing the forces of oppression.

UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

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14 Hazlitt uses the phrase in 'Mr Coleridge' in *The Spirit of the Age*: 'Liberty (the philosopher's and the poet's bride) had fallen a victim, meanwhile, to the murderous practices of the hag, Legitimacy' (xi, 34). He offers an extended description of the relationship between liberty and legitimacy in the 'Preface' to *Political Essays, with Sketches of Public Characters* (1819), (vii, 9–11).

15 For analyses of Hazlitt's attacks on 'legitimacy' see Kevin Gilmartin, *William Hazlitt: Political Essayist*, 107–21; Simon Bainbridge *Napoleon and English Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 192; Philip Harling, 'William Hazlitt and Radical Journalism', *Romanticism* 3.1 (1997), 53–65: 54; Stuart Semmel, 'British Radicals and "Legitimacy": Napoleon in the Mirror of History', *Past & Present*, 167 (May 2000), 140–75.



## HAZLITT'S JOURNEY TO ITALY

*Cristina Consiglio*

In attempting to connect William Hazlitt's life-writing to his experiences travelling through the Italian peninsula, I will begin by tracing the origins of his *Notes on a Journey through France and Italy* and the story of its publication. An outline of the route followed on his journey through Italy will be provided, with a focus on his descriptions of the places he passed through and the cities he visited. The key features that will be highlighted are his wonder at the natural and artistic beauties of the country and his disappointment at some of the faults he found with it, as well as his impressions of the Italian people and their habits. Finally, I will comment on the way in which Hazlitt's *Notes* convey the idea of Italy as a whole, about forty years before its unification.

### I

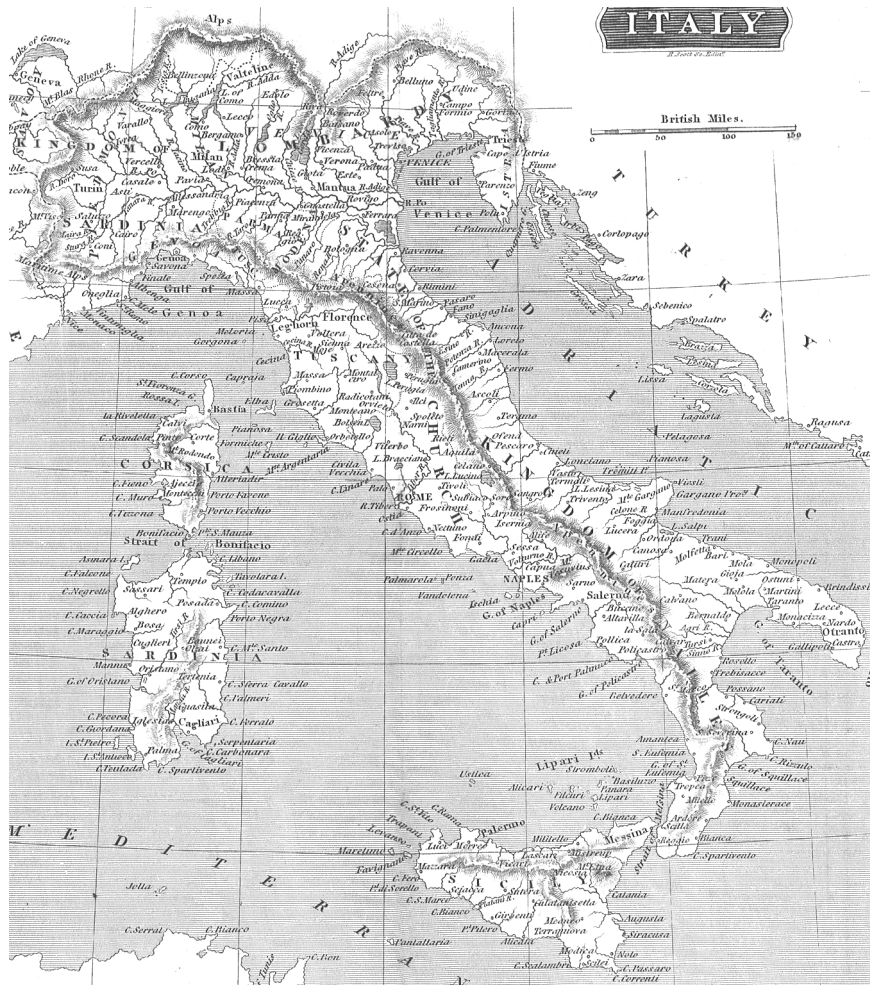
Hazlitt's *Notes on a Journey through France and Italy* is a compilation of articles commissioned by his friend John Black, which appeared at irregular intervals in the *Morning Chronicle* between 14 September 1824 and 16 November 1825. For these articles he was paid £300. It would seem that most of them were written during Hazlitt's extended stays in Paris, Florence, and Vevey. According to Sarah Hazlitt, a few years earlier Hazlitt had proposed writing a *Picturesque Tour of Italy* and the editors Taylor and Hessey had accepted the proposal.<sup>1</sup> When they failed to agree terms, he resolved to sell it to the highest bidder, and so it was finally published in one volume in May 1826, some six months after his return, by the new firm of Hunt and Clarke (Henry Leigh Hunt, the son of Hazlitt's old friend John, and the young Charles Cowden Clarke).

Herschel Baker writes that 'as a record of his [Hazlitt's] travels', the collection of articles

rests upon a base of facts and therefore has a sharper line and firmer texture than his *Table Talks*; but as a string of meditations prompted by those facts [...] it is a potpourri of little essays in his ripest style and manner. Without the depth and resonance of *The Spirit of the Age*, it is none the less a complex piece of work in its fusion of soliloquy and narrative, topography and literary association,

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1 W.H. Bonner (ed.), *The Journals of Sarah and William Hazlitt, 1822–1831* (Buffalo, NY: Buffalo University Press, 1959), 255.



Map of Italy in 1825, printed in the *London General Gazetteer*. The editors wish to thank Kevin Adonis Browne (<https://drbrowne.me/gazetteer/>) for his permission to publish.

social comment and aesthetic judgments; and in addition, it enables us to trace his movements for twelve months or so with extraordinary precision.<sup>2</sup>

In the *Notes*, Hazlitt dealt with a wide variety of subjects and as every stage of his travels inspired him to write about different aspects of the places he visited, including art, religion, and politics, his descriptions of Italy offer the reader an overarching view of the country at the time when it was politically multifaceted and not easily defined.

The volume is made up of twenty-seven chapters, of which Chapters 14 to 24 are about Italy. Hazlitt's Italian route took in five kingdoms – the king of Sardinia's dominions, the duchy of Parma and Modena, the kingdom of Tuscany, the state of the Church, and the kingdom of Lombardy and Venice<sup>3</sup> – and his main stops were in Turin, Parma, Bologna, Florence, Rome, Venice, and Milan. The tour began at the end of the summer of 1824 and ended on 16 October 1825, when Hazlitt and his son, who had joined his father and stepmother somewhere *en route*, returned home by way of St. Omer and Calais. The Hazlitts' route was one well trodden by generations of English travellers: from Brighton to Dieppe, and then Rouen and Paris, where they stayed for several months. After a three-month stay in Paris, it was mid-January 1825 when they set out for Italy, via Lyon and 'the humbler passage' of Mont Cenis rather than the arduous Simplon (x, 182).<sup>4</sup>

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2 Herschel Baker, *William Hazlitt* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 442.

3 Prior to the French Revolution, Italy was divided into many small principalities and republics with rulers of various kinds. There were monarchies in Sardinia and Piedmont, as well as in Naples and Sicily. The Milanese and Mantuan kingdoms belonged to the House of Austria. Tuscany belonged to a prince of the same house, to which it had been given in exchange for Lorraine, in 1736: this duchy was, in 1801, raised to the status of a kingdom by the French, under its ancient name of Etruria. In 1807, Napoleon annexed it to his new kingdom of Italy, along with Parma and Modena, which belonged to the House of Spain, and were governed by their respective dukes. The States of the Church were under the dominion of the pope, who governed them with all the authority of a temporal sovereign; but in 1809, they were annexed to the French empire. The government of Venice and Genoa was aristocratic rather than republican, all the authority of each state being in the hands of the senate, to which none but the hereditary nobility were admitted. As for the two small republics of Lucca and San Marino, they were too insignificant to merit particular notice. Since the downfall of Napoleon, the political condition of Italy had again been remodelled. Naples had been restored to the House of Bourbon. The pope was reinstated in his temporal possessions. Genoa had been transferred to the king of Sardinia. The Archduke Ferdinand was reinstated in Tuscany, and the Archduke Francis in Modena. Parma and Placentia were given to the Empress Maria Louisa, and Venice to the Emperor of Austria, who took the title of King of Lombardy. (From *The Geographical and Statistical Map of Italy: Including the Places Rendered Celebrated by Battles & Sieges; Intended for the Elucidation of Lavoise's Historical Atlas* [Philadelphia, PA: M. Carey & Son, 1820]).

4 All references to Hazlitt's works are taken from *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P.P. Howe, 21 vols (London and Toronto: J.M. Dent, 1930-4). References are by volume and page.

Hazlitt was an attentive and curious observer and when he embarked from Brighton for France, his aim was not to comment on the faults of the countries he would visit by drawing comparisons with English manners – which would have been tedious – but to immerse himself in other cultures and to appreciate them to the full. From the beginning of his *Notes* his intentions are clear:

The rule for travelling abroad is to take our common sense with us, and leave our prejudices behind us. The object of travelling is to see and learn; but such is our impatience of ignorance, or the jealousy of our self-love, that we generally set up a certain preconception beforehand (in self-defence, or as a barrier against the lesson of experience). (x, 89)

At the same time he admits the limits of his observations, due to a lack of language skills and knowledge of local culture, as we read in the 'Advertisement' of the volume:

The only thing I could have wished to expatiate upon more is the manners of the country: but to do justice to this, a greater length of time and a more intimate acquaintance with society and the language would be necessary. Perhaps, at some future opportunity, this defect may be remedied. (x, 85)

## II

The first part of Hazlitt's Italian journey consisted of three days traversing the Alps – 'a sea or an entire kingdom of mountains', in his words (x, 191) – and it was a January night when he arrived in Turin. Here he feels he is in a world new to him, and vividly pictorial. But perhaps what most fuels his sense of well-being is that at last he is warm. He goes out and comes to a promenade outside the town where he suddenly feels that 'The air was soft and balmy, and I felt transported to another climate – another earth – another sky. The winter was suddenly changed to spring. It was as if I had to begin my life anew' (x, 196).

As the journey proceeds, Hazlitt's feelings and the impressions change. Every city is a yardstick for comparison with the others. His detailed account merges descriptions of the scenery and the places where the travellers stop off with his enthusiasm for art in every shape and form. Painting, sculpture, architecture – every detail is food for thought.

In Parma Hazlitt dwelt on an important innovation made by the archduchess Maria Louisa to bring art to a wider public. The travellers reached the capital of the archduchy after a four-day journey, on Saturday 29 January. The landscape changed as they left the Alps behind. The Apennines were an undulating barrier to their progress. Between the two mountain ranges, there was 'one level cultivated plain, one continuous garden [...], an uninterrupted succession of corn-fields, vineyards and orchards, all in the highest state of cultivation' (x, 199). During their visit to Parma, the travellers have the opportunity to see the archduchess at Mass and Hazlitt tells the English reader that she is 'the daughter of a sovereign, the

self-devoted consort of one who only lost himself by taking upon him a degrading equality with Emperors and Kings' (x, 203). The archduchess seems to be about forty, not handsome, but with a mild expression. Hazlitt recalls that there are some 'not very pleasant rumours' circulating about her because she married the man who had defeated her father and she was 'said to have leaned on the Duke of Wellington's arm' (x, 203). But the most important reason that the archduchess is nowadays still remembered is the art gallery she built for her paintings. She transformed her private collection into a public institution – today it is a national gallery – and entrusted the architect Nicola Bettoli and the painter Paolo Toschi with the task of designing a new hall, where the altar pieces by Correggio and several other paintings could be exhibited. Hazlitt did not much like Correggio but was enraptured by the sight of the Farnese Theatre, 'the noblest and most striking monument I have seen of the golden age of Italy [...] a lasting proof of a former age, and of the degeneracy of this!' (x, 205). The visit ends with an overview of the city and its inhabitants:

The streets of Parma are beautiful, airy, clean, spacious; the churches elegant; and the walls around it picturesque and delightful. The walls and ramparts, with the gardens and vineyards close to them, have a most romantic effect; and we saw, on a flight of steps near one of the barriers, a group of men, women, and children, that for expression, composition, and colouring rivalled any thing in painting. We here also observed the extreme clearness and brilliancy of the southern atmosphere: the line of hills in the western horizon was distinguished from the sky by a tint so fine that it was barely perceptible. (x, 205)

The next stop is Bologna. 'Bologna is even superior to Parma' (x, 205). While in Turin and Parma he formed an immediate opinion, Bologna is slow to reveal its true character: 'new beauties unfold themselves, a perspective is gradually prolonged' (x, 205). There is a remark about the Italian 'mere spirit of good fellowship, and the excess of high animal spirits', when a woman who resembled 'a sort of wild *Meg Merrilies* [...] sprang out of a dungeon of a porter's lodge, and seizing upon Madame -----, dragged her by the arm up the staircase [...]. No woman in England would dream of such an extravagance, who was not mad or drunk' (x, 206).

Perspective is always an important feature: as soon as he arrives in Florence, at the beginning of February, ascending a hill, the traveller notes 'a scene of enchantment, a city planted in a garden, and resembling a rich and varied suburb' (x, 211). A few pages later we read that 'Florence in itself is inferior to Bologna, and some other towns; but the view of it and of the immediate neighbourhood is superior to any I have seen' (x, 211). Surrounded by an endless succession of vineyards and olive groves, the Duomo and other churches loom into view while the Arno flows in the distance. On seeing this, Hazlitt remembers some of the luminaries who lived in or around Florence: Michelangelo, Machiavelli, Boccaccio, Galileo, and Milton. Walking through its streets it seems as though time has

stood still; Hazlitt admires the Florentine Lungarno and the beautiful carriages, which make him think of those in England. The natural beauties observed and the recollection of some of the supreme Italian masters lead to a more thorough appreciation and enjoyment of art as a mirror to Nature.

Florence is to Hazlitt the place where 'those who come in search of high Italian art will find it in perfection' (x, 226). He expresses his astonishment at the colossal statues of Bandinelli's Hercules, Michelangelo's David, and Benvenuto Cellini's Perseus set in the square of the Grand Duke – today Piazza della Signoria. But what he admires most is in the Gallery at Florence, namely the Collection of Antique Busts. Although in Paris he had declared that he preferred painting to sculpture, here he seems to change his mind when he affirms that sculpture is an art capable of giving life and body to history. Hazlitt's gaze does not seek or question the exact correspondence between the busts and their labels, nor is he interested in their authenticity. He is amazed by how Nature produced forms as perfect then as she does now. This is the proof of the continuance of the species from the past until the present time, from ancient Rome to contemporary England:

The truth is, that what pleases me in these busts and others of the same kind that I have seen is, that they very much resemble English people of sense and education in the present day, only with more regular features. They are grave, thoughtful, unaffected. (x, 222)

He will feel this sense of wonder and delight again when he visits the collection of busts in the Capitol, in Rome:

I find nothing so delightful as these old Roman heads of Senators, Warriors, Philosophers. They have all the freshness of truth and nature. They shew something substantial in mortality. They are the only things that do not crush and overturn our sense of personal identity; and are a fine relief to the mouldering relics of antiquity, and to the momentary littleness of modern things! (x, 239)

Hazlitt's arrival in Rome is tinged with deep disappointment: 'This is not the Rome I expected to see' (x, 232). Misery and confusion fill the dirty streets of the city. The old ruins that enchanted the Renaissance poets and inspired the scenes of Shakespeare's Roman plays, the city described so powerfully by John Milton in the fourth book of his *Paradise Regained* (ll 44–60) seemed to Hazlitt remarkable but inanimate: 'Rome is great only in ruins' (x, 232). He found the city lacking in energy and went so far as to describe it as life-sapping; it was almost as if the inhabitants had somehow been affected by the dead. His opinion of the Romans continues to deteriorate, leading him to observe that 'The inhabitants of the city have something French about them – something of the cook's and the milliner's shop – something pert, gross, and cunning' (x, 236) and he was not won over until he beheld the beauty of the people living in the countryside: 'the Roman peasants redeem the credit of their golden sky' (x, 236).

The travellers then proceeded through Terni, the Perugian vale, Spoleto, Foligno, and Assisi, until at last they reached Ferrara: 'We walked out in the evening, and found Ferrara enchanting. Of all the places I have seen in Italy, it is the one by far I should most covet to live in [...]. You are in a dream, in the heart of a romance' (x, 265). Ferrara had not been an independent state since 1597, when it fell to the Popes and lost much of its wealth. But once more, what distinguishes one state from another is not politics but art: we read about some graceless statues, an aspect 'which distinguished the Lombardo-Venetian States' (x, 266).

When Hazlitt writes about Ferrara, his words seem to anticipate the fairy-like sight that will unfold when for the first time – on board a gondola – he will see Venice appear on the horizon through the vapours of the lagoon, at sunset. He is affected with mingled marvel and incredulity. Hazlitt's Venetian notes are full of wonder; there is no discrepancy between expectations and experience. Venice is an unrivalled city; it stands alone. In her uniqueness every contradiction is reconciled: freedom is reconciled with aristocracy, commerce with nobility, the ambition of gaining a title with the pride of being born noble. Everything is a work of art and at the same time a passing fancy; there is nothing simple or severe in the Venetian taste, in a city where the superfluous is a common reality.

'Her origin was a wonder: her end is to surprise' (x, 267). The magnificent Venetian architecture makes the buildings in Rome seem like dungeons. Of the Grimani Palace, he writes that 'Aladdin might have exchanged his for it, and given his lamp into the bargain' (x, 269). He admires the Pisani Palace for its elegance and splendour, the Barbarigo Palace for having hosted Titian. Hazlitt gives a very detailed account of almost all of the most important pieces of art in Venice. Nonetheless, he concludes the chapter with these words: 'I have thus hastily run through what struck me as most select in fine art in this celebrated city. To enumerate every thing would be endless' (x, 274). A mixed feeling of satisfaction and regret accompanies the travellers as they leave the lagoon.

### III

In his descriptions, Hazlitt frequently shifts from places to their inhabitants and he is struck by their appearance, especially that of the women. In Turin, for example, his expectations fell short and he could not resist saying: 'the women in Italy are detestably ugly' (x, 196), although he is aware that this is only 'so far as I have seen hitherto' (x, 196). In Parma, 'the women that I saw did not answer to my expectations' while 'the men looked better' (x, 201). Not until Florence did he obtain any satisfaction in this respect, when from the window of his coach he caught sight of 'the only very handsome Italian we have yet seen' (x, 207). Subsequently, however, he becomes wide-eyed with admiration for the women he meets in Rome. The young women that come to Rome

from Gensano and Albano, and that are known by their scarlet boddices and white head-dresses and handsome good-humoured faces, are the finest specimens I have ever seen of human nature. They are like creatures that have

breathed the air of Heaven, till the sun has ripened them into perfect beauty, health, and goodness. They are universally admired in Rome. The English women that you see, though pretty, are pieces of dough to them. (x, 236)

Shortly before they took their leave of 'the Roman States,' Hazlitt had noticed that, going north, even the facial features of the inhabitants of the peninsula change: they become more severe and their eyes convey a darkened mood: 'the people looked exceedingly plain and hard-featured, after having passed the Roman States. They have the look of the Scotch people, only fiercer and more ill-tempered' (x, 263). Later he finds that women in Milan are handsome: 'I think I never saw so many well-grown, well-made, good-looking women as at Milan' (x, 277), but their nature is colder than that of the women he met and admired in the streets of Rome.

The traveller's notebook continues to be enriched with further information on the Italian people and on the beauties of Italy. Walking through the streets of the Italian cities, Hazlitt can observe how the habits of the people change according to the traditions connected to the different periods of the year: during the Carnival people disguise themselves, while during Lent – the period immediately following the Carnival – the festive air turns austere. There is a passage, in his pages about Florence, where the traveller recalls the case of a Neapolitan nobleman who abused the tradition of masking: 'He went to the English Ambassador's in the disguise of a monk, carrying a bundle of wood at his back, with a woman's legs peeping out, and written on a large label, "Provision for the Convent". The clergy, it is said, interfered, and he has been exiled to Lucca' (x, 213).

Hazlitt uses this episode as a means of broaching the subject of the clergy in Italy, to which he will return in his account of Rome. For instance, he writes about the rule outlawing the theatrical imitation of religious characters, making a comparison with the Alien Act promulgated in England in 1705 to keep the Scottish out of England, and he wonders how the tragedy of the star-crossed lovers in Verona might be played without the friar.

When he writes about Lent in Italy, Hazlitt recalls the smell of fish, garlic, tobacco, cloves and oil while walking down the streets; but when he recalls the pilgrims he met, he has reservations about their customs and their intentions. It seems to him that the popish religion serves solely to conceal a sense of self-interest. Good and evil, rewards and punishments, guilt and repentance blend into something that Hazlitt defines as:

*A make-believe religion: man is a make-believe animal – he is never so truly himself as when he is acting a part; he is ever at war with himself – his theory with his practice – what he would be (and therefore pretends to be) with what he is; and Popery is an admirable receipt to reconcile his higher and his lower nature in a beautiful equivoque or double-entendre of forms and mysteries.* (x, 215)

Hazlitt dwells on this subject but, despite views to the contrary, he admits that what should always be remembered is that man has a propensity to the marvellous



and contradictory. There is no connection between the honesty the Roman women show when they come to visit the shrine of some favourite saint and repeat their *aves* aloud and the farce of the popery, that outward appearance of the religious forms described by Hazlitt with the language of theatrical fiction, such as ‘the pageant of an hour’ or ‘the rest is a puppet-shew!’ (x, 236). A number of pages and miles later, Hazlitt recalls a positive aspect of his stay in Rome:

I forgot to mention, in the proper place, that I was quite delighted with the external deportment of the ecclesiastics in Rome. It was marked by a perfect propriety, decorum, and humanity, from the highest to the lowest. Not the slightest look or gesture to remind you that you were foreigners or heretics – an example of civility that is far from being superfluous, even in the capital of the Christian world. (x, 261)

#### IV

In Italy, then, Hazlitt is fascinated and delighted by art, the colours of the landscape, the architecture of the cities. He also occasionally adds notes on the contemporary political situation. In his words the Italian people, like the French and the Spanish, are already united. In the *Notes*, the first reference to Italy is when the travellers cross the Alps and stop in Susa: ‘we first perceived the difference of Italian manners’ and, since they are leaving France, there is a first reference to borders (x, 195). Some of the most relevant passages about borders and the fact that Italy was still divided into many kingdoms, principalities, and republics are those describing the entrance to ‘the territories of Maria-Louisa (the little state of Parma and Placentia)’ (x, 199), or when the travellers are *en route* to Florence and their luggage has to be examined again ‘on entering the Tuscan States’ (x, 209). When they leave for Rome following the barren and dreary road via Siena, a quick exchange of information with the *vetturino* or coachman reveals that they have entered another kingdom: ‘I asked in whose dominions we were, and received for answer, “In the Pope’s”’ (x, 231).

The first adventure of the journey occurred at the custom-house at Pont Beau-voisin, when they entered the king of Sardinia’s dominions. Of the two trunks Hazlitt was travelling with, ‘one contained books’ (x, 186). The first trunk passed unchallenged at the *douane*, but when he unlocked the second, it provoked a sudden expression of surprise in the guards, as if it had been ‘filled with cartridge-paper or gun-powder’ or ‘the lid of Pandora’s box flew open’ (x, 186). The writer thus has to defend the value hidden in each volume. These volumes are, indeed:

The corrosive sublimate that eat out despotism and priestcraft – the artillery that battered down castle and dungeon-walls – the ferrets that ferreted out abuses – the lynx-eyed guardians that tore off disguises – the scales that weighed right and wrong, the thumping make-weight thrown into the balance that made force and fraud, the sword and the cowl, kick and beam – the dread

of knaves, the scoff of fools – the balm and the consolation of the human mind – the salt of the earth – the future rulers of the world! (x, 186)

The authorities continue to check the books 'with equal gravity and politeness' (x, 187), flicking through them one by one – Lord Bacon, Milton, Destutt de Tracy, Mignet and so on – and finally decide to make the trunk 'a prisoner of state' (x, 187). When Hazlitt arrives in Turin, bad news awaits: the trunk, he says, will be 'forwarded to me anywhere I choose to mention, out of his Sardinian Majesty's dominions' (x, 187). To his bewilderment, the traveller has found himself 'within the smooth and polished grasp of legitimate power' (x, 187), without having suspected it – as if to say that there is a kind of power within the kingdoms that make up Italy, but that is not easily perceived. The confiscation of his trunk at the first Italian border only served to heighten his sympathy with the palpable desire for freedom in the country.

At this point it is worth underlining the observation Hazlitt puts in the footnote. He recalls a gentleman who arrived in Milan carrying some books with him. One of them was a volume by Homer, in both the Greek and Latin versions. The inspector let the book pass, but advised the gentleman he should bring with him an edition of the Lives of the Popes 'containing all the abominations (public and private) of their history' (x, 187). To Hazlitt the episode is evidence that there was a 'learned conspiracy for the suppression of light and letters, of which we are sleeping partners and honorary associates' (x, 187). To support this idea, he asserts that the Austrians 'have lately attempted to strike the name of Italy out of the maps, that that country may neither have a name, a body or a soul left to it' (x, 187). His words recall the works written by two of the finest historians to convey the perception of Italy as a unique reality, namely the *Storia d'Italia* (1561) by Francesco Guicciardini and the *Storia delle guerre civili di Francia* (1630) by Enrico Caterino Davila. A tone of contempt enters Hazlitt's voice and he wonders why 'the cause of the people of Europe has no echo in the breasts of the British public' or in the breast of George Canning, then the Foreign Secretary, when 'no fewer than fifteen hundred of the Italian nobility of the first families are proscribed from their country, or pining in dungeons [...] for trying to give to their country independence and a Constitutional Government, like England!' (x, 188). The note ends with a request to the House of Lords to ward off the risk of having 'a servile people and an arbitrary government' (x, 187).

There are no other passages in the text where Hazlitt expresses himself so passionately, although when the travellers cross the Apennines again, the critic remembers that the Austrian troops had followed that route to Naples three years before, 'to the support of good government and social order' (x, 259). This seems to be another instance of the repressive conduct of the Austrians in the Italian territories, driven by the need to restore a 'social order'.<sup>5</sup> There is another reference

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5 Here Hazlitt refers to the revolutionary wave that swept across the kingdom of the Two Sicilies as a consequence of the Spanish Revolution of 1820. The intervention of the Austrian army caused the revolution to fail.

to the passing of the Austrians on the homeward journey too, after the last stops in northern Italy, Padua, Verona, Brescia, and Milan. Hazlitt had felt that the northern Italians were ‘as fine a race of people as walked the earth’ (x, 276). All they needed to be is ‘what they once were, or that any people is capable of becoming’ – which meant ‘three words spoken to the other powers: “Let them alone!”’ (x, 276). From the moment of his arrival, he felt pity for the way Italy was being oppressed as a result of the menacing presence of the Austrians, who were quick to suppress any attempts to assert freedom.

## V

The beauty of Italy is described with originality and keen intelligence in Hazlitt’s *Notes*. The fixed forms and clichés set out by the travel guides regain shape and colours in the pictures painted by the English critic. The reader savours the sense of discovery. In the twentieth chapter of the book, Hazlitt declares the greatest difficulty for English travellers:

They do not like to smell to a rose, or to taste of made-dishes, or to listen to soft music, or to look at fine pictures, or to make or hear fine speeches, or to enjoy themselves or amuse others; but they will knock any man down who tells them so, and their sole delight is to be as uncomfortable and disagreeable as possible. To them the greatest labour is to be pleased: they hate to have nothing to find fault with: to expect them to smile or to converse on equal terms, is the heaviest tax you can levy on their want of animal spirits or intellectual resources. A drop of pleasure is the most difficult thing to extract from their hard, dry, mechanical, husky frame; a civil word or look is the last thing they can part with. (x, 242–3)

Later he adds, ‘Something wrong somewhere, in reality or imagination, in public or in private, is necessary to the minds of the English people’ (x, 246). Yet, if this is what the English travellers were really like, William Hazlitt’s *Notes* tells us how the Italian peninsula at that time, in all its harmony and disharmony, was able to overcome or at least to subdue that ingrained tendency to silence and ill humour and remove every possible shadow of prejudice from their minds.

Hazlitt perceived Italy as an open gallery of artistic and natural beauties. Though divided into kingdoms and limited by borders, the peninsula had a common denominator: it was the essence of beauty ready to be transformed into the most various expressions. Reading about Italy in Hazlitt’s *Notes of a Journey through France and Italy*, it is easy for readers today to forget that at that time Italy did not exist as a nation state. Maybe because of the recurrence of the adjective *Italian*, maybe because the description of the urban and natural areas is so close to reality – the pleasure of narration prevails over the political turmoil of those years and in a certain way seems to predict the success of Italian unification in 1861.



**Cristina Consiglio, *William Hazlitt lettore di Shakespeare*.**

pp. 152. Lecce: PensaMultimedia, 2013. €16.

**Cristina Consiglio (ed. and transl.), *William Hazlitt. Ritratti romani***

pp. 85. Viterbo: Settecittà, 2013. €12.

**Alfonso Geraci and Francesco Romero (ed. and transl.), *William Hazlitt. I personaggi del teatro di Shakespeare***

pp. 314. Palermo: Sellerio, 2016. €18.

In this overview of the three most recent works published on Hazlitt in Italy, it will be useful to offer some preliminary remarks regarding the twentieth-century translations into Italian and Italian scholarly works on the critic. As Alfonso Geraci underlines in his detailed bibliographical afterword to the translation of *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, Italian translations and quotes from Hazlitt's works are very few, compared to the reception that other nineteenth-century English writers have had. In 1916, Emilio Cecchi, one of the most important Italian critics of the first half of the century, in his *Storia della letteratura inglese nel secolo XIX (History of English Literature in the Nineteenth Century)* described Hazlitt as the master of English modern critics, superior to Coleridge in his sense of history and to Lamb and to De Quincey in intellectual vigour. Five years later Benedetto Croce, another widely renowned Italian critic, would quote with admiration Hazlitt's *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* in his *Ariosto, Shakespeare e Corneille (Ariosto, Shakespeare and Corneille)*. Notwithstanding the opinion of these distinguished predecessors, Hazlitt's reception – or rather lack of reception – in Italy was strongly influenced by the 'founding father' of English studies in Italy, Mario Praz. In 1931, at the end of the celebration of the centennial of the death of the critic, Praz replied in the negative to the question 'Is Hazlitt a great essayist?', arguing that he was 'too abstract' and too little attentive to style and 'details'. This definitive verdict would be repeated in 1936 in his *Storia della letteratura inglese (History of English Literature)* and lead to our critic falling into temporary oblivion as far as Italian literary circles were concerned.

In 1948 the first Italian translations of an anthology of Hazlitt's essays appeared, but the voice that actually raised Hazlitt's profile in Italy was that of the Sicilian writer, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa. In his lectures on English literature delivered in Palermo between 1953 and 1954 (these were published under the title *Letteratura inglese: L'Ottocento e il Novecento* by Mondadori only in 1990) he stated that Hazlitt 'never let his political prejudices overcome his artistic merits' and that the *Characters* was one of Hazlitt's best three works, together with the *Lectures on*

*the English Poets and the Dramatic Literature of the Age of Elizabeth*. If we look at the Italian theatrical scene, on the other hand, when Giorgio Strehler staged *Coriolanus* at the Piccolo Teatro in Milan in 1957, he complained of the lack of criticism on the play, the exception being Hazlitt's notes. Less than twenty years later Vittorio Gassmann, one of the greatest Italian actors of the second half of the twentieth century, compared Hazlitt with Edmund Kean in two plays where both the critic and the actor were among the main characters: the first play, *O Cesare o nessuno (Either Caesar or Nothing)* was staged in 1974 while the second, entitled *Bugie sincere (Sincere Lies)*, was written and performed in 1997. Gassmann rated Hazlitt as the most distinguished English theatrical and literary critic of the nineteenth century and admired him especially for his ability in pointing out the differences between Kean's performances of Shakespeare's characters.

In the 1980s and 1990s, there was an increase of interest in Hazlitt's work that began with the publication of the Italian translation of *Liber Amoris* by Lia Scalabrella Gavilli (1978), followed by some essays taken from *Table-Talk* translated by Fabio De Propis (*L'ignoranza delle persone colte*, Fazi, 1992) and from *The Plain Speaker* by Catherine McGilvray (*Il piacere dell'odio*, Fazi, 1996). A number of theatrical reviews were translated by Paola degli Esposti and included in two volumes entitled *La scena del Romanticismo inglese 1807–1833 (The Scene of English Romanticism 1807–1833)*, Esedara, 2001 and 2003).

Another ten years of silence followed, until two volumes by Cristina Consiglio, a researcher in English literature at the University of Bari, were published in 2013: the first is entitled *William Hazlitt lettore di Shakespeare (William Hazlitt as a Reader of Shakespeare)* and it focuses on Hazlitt's reading of the four major tragedies: *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*, and *Lear*. The four essays exhibit the critic's remarkable ability to sum up the characteristics of each play and Shakespeare's leading qualities. With a keen eye, Hazlitt cleverly mixes stage fiction with the reality of human passions, offering the reader a portrait gallery of rare truth and beauty. It was the first time that translations of these chapters of the *Characters* had been published in Italy and shed new light on the essayist for the Italian reader.<sup>1</sup>

The volume *William Hazlitt lettore di Shakespeare* contains a foreword outlining Hazlitt's education and life. The most notable aspect of this work is that every translation is followed by a critical commentary and notes on Hazlitt's lively reviews of performances of the plays published in newspapers and popular magazines, then collected in *A View of the English Stage*, *The Round Table*, and *Dramatic Criticism*, in which he investigated the nature of Shakespearean characters and questioned the style of the actors. Considerable space is devoted in the study to how the critic reinterpreted the most famous passages of the works of Shakespeare – for instance, how Kean's Hamlet coming back to silently kiss Ophelia's hand 'had an electrical effect on the house' or the reason why Macbeth seeing his own bloodied hands

1 The only other chapter already translated was *Cymbeline* by Ottavio di Fidio and published by Il Saggiatore in a collection of essays entitled *La fortuna di Shakespeare (Shakespeare's Heritage)*, 1965, edited by Gabriele Baldini, an eminent Shakespearean scholar, author of *Manualetto shakespeariano (Shakespearean Handbook)*, Einaudi, 1964) a milestone in Shakespearean studies in Italy.

‘was a scene no one who saw it could ever efface from his recollection’ – and how he explored and compared the different acting techniques of the most acclaimed performers on the London scene: David Garrick, John Philip Kemble, Sarah Siddons, and Edmund Kean.

The second volume published in 2013 and edited by Cristina Consiglio is entitled *William Hazlitt. Ritratti romani (William Hazlitt: Roman Portraits)* and it focuses on the three chapters in the *Characters* devoted to the Roman plays: *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*. In this edition the translations of the essays are printed in parallel to the original text. In the introduction to the volume – ‘La Storia in scena in *Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays*’ (‘History on Stage in *Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays*’) – Consiglio conducts a brief but useful examination of Hazlitt’s reading of Shakespeare’s Roman plays and characters, while in the afterword – ‘Lettori e spettatori. I Romantici e il teatro shakespeariano’ (‘Readers and Spectators: The Romantics and Shakespearean Theatre’) – she carries out a thorough analysis of the different perspectives of the Romantics on staging and reading the plays of Shakespeare, in the shape of the accounts by Leigh Hunt, Charles Lamb, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Hazlitt himself.

Finally, in 2016, following the fourth centennial of Shakespeare’s death, Sellerio published the first Italian translation of the whole volume of *Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays* by Alfonso Geraci and Francesco Romeo. Given the history of the Italian reception of Hazlitt’s work, this might be considered a risky publishing venture, but the work is undoubtedly of great value. The quality of the translations is high, and the language is appropriately elegant and refined. Where Consiglio chooses to give Hazlitt’s style a more contemporary feel, Geraci and Romeo’s use of diction is more polished and effectively embraces the archaic. Even more impressive is the appendix at the end of the volume written by Geraci and entitled ‘Avventure di un libro sedizioso’ (‘Adventures of a Seditious Book’). It is divided into three sections – ‘I. Waterloo’, ‘II. Intermezzo: I *Personaggi* dall’Impero alla Guerra Fredda’, ‘III. Chi vince perde tutto’ (‘I. Waterloo’, ‘II. Intermezzo: *Characters* from the Empire to the Cold War’, ‘III. Winner Loses All’) – and it illustrates how Hazlitt’s writings on Shakespeare and particularly the controversial chapter on *Coriolanus* have been read through the last two centuries both in the UK and elsewhere, and how the critic has recently become once more the focus of a political and cultural debate. Geraci’s essay can also be interpreted as a further proof of the immense value of Shakespeare’s plays, which have proved a treasure trove for every age. The concluding essay of the volume ends with a remark about the foundation of the Hazlitt Society in 2003 and its fundamental role in encouraging and promoting Hazlitt’s work and values since then.

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**Michael D. Hurley and Marcus Waithe (eds.), *Thinking Through Style: Non-Fiction Prose of the Long Nineteenth Century***

pp. xiv + 359. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Cloth, £60.

Permission to talk about style is a rare thing in these issue-driven days, but that is what this book has given itself, making a wonderful case not only for twenty prose stylists of the long nineteenth century, from Coleridge to T.S. Eliot, but also for the close analysis of prose more generally, as an illuminating and suggestive field of study. This is a collection for those who, like Charles Lamb, feel that ‘prose has her cadences’, and who prefer sitting at its ‘organ’, as Oscar Wilde once winningly described it, rather than playing on ‘pipe or reed’. A great case is made here for refocusing our critical attention on the nuts and bolts of literary argument, observing the ways in which rhythm, register, prepositions, parentheses, dashes, metaphors, and abstract nouns have been deployed not merely for ornamental effect but to enable and dramatize thought. How the greatest writers have sought to think *through* style: that is the central concern of this book, and each chapter is assiduous in its pursuit of it.

As is perhaps inevitable in a book of this kind, almost all of the chapters here take the form of recommendations, although some are heartier than others. Matthew Bevis’s essay on Lamb is a witty and timely piece on why we should take seriously Lamb’s refusal to be taken seriously, on the underlying wisdom behind his cloak of folly. ‘Seriousness of purpose, for Lamb,’ Bevis writes, ‘is heralded by an uncertainty or forgetfulness of purposes; it’s as though you are permitted to say you are serious only once you admit you don’t know everything the word can mean’ (44). Bevis is eloquent on style in Lamb as the expression of a hard-won philosophy of life, a means of peeping out into the world while simultaneously protecting oneself from it. ‘One of the great pleasures of reading Lamb,’ he writes, ‘is the sense he gives of how style may act both as a conviction and as an alibi’ (47). Few critics have written so well on Lamb as a *comic* writer as Bevis does in this chapter. ‘Elia doesn’t simply attempt to reconcile us to mistakes and misunderstandings,’ he tells us, ‘he invites us to long for them, and to live more intensely by them’ (48).

Hazlitt is another prose stylist whose academic stock is high at the moment, after influential monographs on the subject from David Bromwich, Uttara Natarajan, Tom Paulin, and Kevin Gilmartin. But even in the wake of all this attention, Freya Johnston still finds fresh and illuminating things to say, most especially on the notion of ‘keeping’ in Hazlitt, this being the critic’s preferred term for a kind of unity or integrity in art, and, in respect of prose argument, a capacity to combine momentum with steadfastness. For Hazlitt, as Johnston memorably puts it:

the appropriateness of form to content was something to be fought for; it must never be allowed to relapse into cosiness. The pearl that is the essay

therefore retains traces of the grit that irritated the oyster into action and production. (61)

Sentences like this show how thoroughly Johnston is in tune with her subject, the conclusion to her chapter being particularly fine, focusing as it does on Hazlitt's use of prepositions:

Because Hazlitt is so frequently occupied with relation and motion – across, upwards, downwards – his use of prepositions of movement rewards attention. Given his appetite for freedom and loathing of tyranny, there is often a social implication in play: 'To *look down* upon any thing seemingly implies a greater elevation and enlargement of view than to *look up* to it.' (63)<sup>1</sup>

Johnston then goes on to exemplify this by looking at the way Hazlitt uses prepositions in his famous chapter on Wordsworth in *The Spirit of the Age*:

[Wordsworth's poetry] partakes of, and is carried along with, the revolutionary movement of our age: the political changes of the day were the model on which he formed and conducted his poetical experiments [...] There is a lofty philosophic tone, a thoughtful humanity, infused into his pastoral vein. Remote from the passions and events of the great world, he has communicated interest and dignity to the primal movements of the heart of man, and ingrafted his own conscious reflections on the casual thoughts of hinds and shepherds [...] the tall rock lifts its head in the erectness of his spirit; the cataract roars in the sound of his verse; and in its dim and mysterious meaning, the mists seem to gather in the hollows of Helvellyn, and the forked Skiddaw hovers in the distance. (65)

Here Hazlitt's use of cliff-hanging prepositions foregrounds the sublime transfusions of power that are the life-blood of Wordsworth's poetry – the grand historical forces which first brought it into being, and which it then proceeded to communicate to, ingraft on, and infuse into, its subjects. More than that, Johnston shows how, in his restless, insistent use of them, Hazlitt effectively marks the shifting ground of his own ambivalence, his own inability to fix on a stable view.

In the case of characters to whom Hazlitt responds as vigorously and contradictorily as he does to Wordsworth, prepositions can signal the awkward rush of conviction, responsiveness, and resistance to another point of view, the flow of an argument that picks up and stumbles over materials that seem at one moment intuitively, instinctively apposite and at another as cause for recoil. It is to his credit that the remnants of his mixed feelings are left honestly to stand, without destroying the coherence of the work in which they appear. (66)

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1 The quotation is from Hazlitt's essay 'On Egotism'.

Johnston concludes her fine chapter with the assertion that ‘to Hazlitt’s style might be applied his judgement of literary conversation: his prose may sometimes be “very absurd, very unsatisfactory, and full of turbulence and heart-burnings; but it has a zest in it” – a zest that cannot be found anywhere else. It is “the glittering expanse of a profound and restless imagination”’ (66).<sup>2</sup>

Of the other writers in this volume whose style is easiest to swallow whole, the foremost are perhaps Darwin, George Eliot, and Wilde, who each receive very ingenious and illuminating recommendations. In his chapter on Darwin, James Williams celebrates the ‘theological virtues’ in the naturalist’s writings – their faith, hope and charity. The charity here – to take one example – is seen to lie in the way in which Darwin’s prose allows space for disagreement, and attempts to bring its dissenting readers into progressive conversation with it. ‘Opposing views are amplified, not brushed aside,’ Williams argues, ‘because Darwin’s writing requires them for its integrity’ (158). Williams also has some very nice insights on the importance of personal observation in Darwin, seeing it as the rhetorical bedrock upon which his scientific authority is founded, and a powerful rhythmic principle in his prose. Arguably there are virtues of a similar kind at work in George Eliot’s non-fictional prose, which is here very eloquently championed by Dinah Birch. ‘In her fiction, as in her critical prose,’ Birch writes, ‘Eliot constructs a style in which the exercise of a powerful intelligence is in part directed towards an acknowledgement of the limits of what thinking can achieve’ (168). Quoting from the essay on the Evangelical teaching of Dr. Cumming, Birch shows how in the process of showing ‘it is the idea of God, rather than God himself, that represents the reality of salvation,’ Eliot finds herself writing that most progressive but paradoxical of things, a secular sermon, in a tone that is resolutely formal and yet still possessed of a common touch.

One might be forgiven for thinking that everything that was to be said about the prose style of Oscar Wilde has already been said long ago, but Hugh Haughton proves otherwise, penning a thoughtful, wide-ranging, and consistently refreshing piece on the most self-conscious stylist of the *fin de siècle*. Haughton registers the influence of Emerson, Ruskin, and Pater, while also recording Wilde’s movements beyond them; he also shows the causes and effects of that daring link the Irishman made between *having a style* in the literary sense and *having style* in the more worldly one.

Robert Louis Stevenson’s reputation has been on the rise of late – and Adrian Poole’s fine chapter on the essays and travel writing helps demonstrate why. In his essay ‘On Some Technical Elements of Style in Literature’ Stevenson showed just how self-conscious a prose stylist he was, having absorbing things to say about choice of words, the web (the plaiting and weaving of meaning), the rhythm of the phrase, and, above all, the patterning of sound and letters across sentences and prose paragraphs. No matter where it is heading or what it has got on board,

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2 The quotations are from Hazlitt’s essays ‘On the Conversation of Authors’ and ‘On the Prose-Style of Poets.’

Stevenson's prose remains one of the most shipshape of vessels, its surface often urgent and breezy, its underlying aesthetic unexpectedly graceful and assured.

As a literary thinker Coleridge has had no shortage of followers, but few of them have ever tried to offer him up as a master of prose style. By his own admission, he hated composition, and when composing, consolidation: 'over-activity of Thought, modified by constitutional Indolence' he wrote, 'made it more pleasant to me to continue acquiring, than to reduce what I had acquired to a regular Form' (13).<sup>3</sup> But going against the grain of received opinion, James Engell sees a unique vital principle in his prose: 'His sentences, clauses within sentences, phrases within clauses, propagate' Engell writes. 'Beginning with a core statement, sentences spawn dependent clauses, appositions, parentheses, notes, semicolons, and new sentences, which "follow the movement of the mind in the process of thought"' (13). To Coleridge, of course, his habits of mind were not immethodical, but on the contrary, redolent of true method. As Engell puts it: 'the winding stair of the ruined tower leads *upward* to truths actually *foundational*' (23).

Inevitably, not all of the writers featured here are as easy for modern readers to appreciate, sometimes for ideological reasons, sometimes for stylistic. Hence it was with great surprise and delight that I found myself completely won over to John Henry Newman by Michael D. Hurley's fine piece 'Thinking out into Language' and to a new way of thinking about P.B. Shelley's prose, which I had always considered brilliant but rather brittle, by a masterful chapter on the subject from Michael O'Neill.

Towards the end of *Thinking Through Style*, Marcus Waithe makes a splendid case for late Ruskin as a fundamentally pedagogic writer of a distinctly peculiar – but also peculiarly rewarding – kind. Waithe argues that to Ruskin 'the word "teacher" applies in its broadest sense': 'Ruskin's "lessons" are not unlike the "lessens" that Alice encounters in Wonderland: they are forms of instruction that leave you knowing less in one sense than you did when you set out on them' (187).

Other more difficult recommendations include Emerson and the young T.S. Eliot. In the former case Adam Phillips does a marvellous job of reconstructing the difficult goal that Emerson set himself, while still leaving us, as readers, free to consider whether the goal was really worth pursuing in that form. 'Emerson's project', Phillips writes, 'was to find a style that was not a tyranny, and in doing this he was acknowledging, at its most minimal, that style, at least as we have so far conceived it, tends towards the tyrannical. Unless, that is – like the shellfish – it comes to no conclusions, and can endlessly renew itself' (146). In a similar mood Stefan Collini does a fine job of reconstructing the journalistic context out of which Eliot's early and most strident literary criticism emerged, and yet without ever seeking to champion it as such. With the benefit of a hundred years' hindsight, much of Eliot's early literary journalism can be a little hard to take. It strikes a new attitude, to be sure, and makes space for a new aesthetic (most notably that of his own poetry), while remaining, as criticism, so flagrantly rhetorical, insubstantial,

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3 The quote is from Coleridge's *The Friend*.

or as Eliot himself confessed when looking back years later, 'the braggadocio of the mild-mannered man safely entrenched behind his typewriter'.

But it is one of the achievements of this volume that it makes such a splendid case, or series of cases, for writers, at whose critical core there lay a strange areas of insubstantiality; or to put it in another way, and one far more in sympathy with the spirit of this volume, it makes a series of cases for writers who did new things with the insubstantial – whose style was able to make a lot of what was not there. In his essay on Arnold, David Russell argues winningly for a sympathetic view of Arnold's cultural criticism as being deliberately vague in its core concepts, capable of inspiring *through* its vagueness, while deliberately avoiding appropriation from outside. Focusing on what he calls the 'empty words' of Arnold's cultural criticism, words or word phrases such as 'Philistinism', 'Culture', 'the State', and 'sweetness and light', Russell asks himself how it would be if, instead of condemning these terms as irritatingly imprecise, we could begin to think of them as cannily, suggestively open, 'a considered response to the particular challenge for criticism in nineteenth-century Britain' (202). Indeed, in Russell's view, the very status that Arnold accrued to himself as a progressive educator – and educationalist – may have largely depended on him not spelling out what he meant.

In Walter Pater, Angela Leighton also finds an aesthetic of vagueness, albeit of a different kind. Notwithstanding Pater's primary status as a lecturer and teacher, she finds that in his prose the actual, instrumental knowledge that is being communicated in his works is as nothing compared to the curious wisdom that is being conveyed in the prose-music, that music of meandering lists and wistful codas. Crucial to the expression of this tendency, this habit of thought, is the dash – one of Pater's favourite stylistic devices, the thin key to his magic casement, opening out onto faery lands forlorn. As Leighton explains: 'the dash, traditionally the hack journalist's sign of a rushed job, becomes, in Pater, the deeply time-conscious signature of an afterthought' (219). Over and over again in this book, the argument is made that in the very greatest non-fiction prose writers of this period, the medium is the message, and that even in the smallest choices of word, rhythm and vocabulary, serious thinking is being done.

Many of the authors treated here are thoroughly canonical – although that does not make them any less deserving of a place in this collection, as the chapters on them all go on to show. Still, it is good to see some new faces in the gallery as well. Harriet Martineau and Vernon Lee, who are both championed very forcefully, more than justify their place, so too William James, who is given a subtle appreciation by Philip Davis. As to exclusions, it may be possible to mention a few, even if not all of them are to be regretted. Robert Southey is not included here, nor is J.S. Mill, and nor is J.B. Macaulay. But more surprising, perhaps, is the fact there is no space for Thomas De Quincey – and this last does seem a curious omission, given the general theme of the book. Perhaps it was felt that De Quincey's prose has already been given more than enough attention of late: certainly he is in no present danger of being forgotten. Even so, it was strange not to see him represented here, given that he is certainly one of the more internationally influential of English prose

stylists in this period, and that his essay series 'On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts' is, among other things, a meditation on the aesthetics of prose. Less unexpected, but perhaps still regrettable, was the leaving out of Cobbett. Not only would Cobbett's inclusion have redressed a slight bias against political writing in this volume (Hazlitt, Carlyle, and Coleridge all figure in these pages, but not in their character as political figures). It would also have made the collection a little less metropolitan and bourgeois.

Such small regrets aside, I have to say that *Thinking Through Style* is one of the most enjoyable and illuminating academic collections I have read in recent years. The contributors are among the most stylish literary historians writing in English today. Some are well established; others still relatively young, but here they all rub along together very comfortably, and the overall standard is dizzyingly high. Valuable enough as a gallery of great nineteenth-century non-fiction writers, this collection is also, in its way, a kind of source book of prose style, having something interesting to say *through* its authors about a wide range of specific parts of speech and punctuation markings, from parentheses and dashes to dangling prepositions and abstract nouns. Truly this collection deserves to become a touchstone for thinking about non-fiction prose style, not least because it is itself such an elegantly written tome.

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The Hazlitt Society grew out of the project to restore Hazlitt's long-neglected grave in St Anne's churchyard, Soho. It was restored by public subscription and the renewed gravestone, in black Lakeland slate, was unveiled by Michael Foot on the 225th anniversary of Hazlitt's birth, 10 April 2003. The committee which was formed for the purpose of the restoration established the Society to encourage appreciation of Hazlitt's work and to promote his values.

Each year there is a lecture by an eminent Hazlitt scholar on the Saturday closest to 18 September, the day Hazlitt died. A newsletter, sent out in the spring of each year, alerts members of the Society to this lecture, which is free of charge, and any other events that may be of interest to admirers of Hazlitt.

The Society is closely associated with the annual Hazlitt Day-school that takes place on the same day as the annual lecture in London. Members qualify for concessionary rates.

The Society publishes *The Hazlitt Review*.

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